

Sailing Beyond the Horizon

June 20, 2021

I volunteered to deliver the sermon on the “Calming of the Sea” story because it’s about boating. I had no idea at the time it would be for Father’s Day. Even better! A story about a bunch of guys going out for a joy ride on the water. What could be more appropriate for today?

Now lest you think I’ve lost my feminist moorings, I know plenty of women who own their own boats. I am one of them. I’ve given up sailing for a kayak, but boating ran through my family.

I sailed for over 10 years on Green Bay. I know that many of you have much longer tenure than that, but I found that when the wind kicks up and waves rock the boat, everyone gets religious! Today’s story has all the parts of a boat in distress:

- Jesus takes the boys on a boat trip after a hard day of preaching – check!
- He falls asleep while everyone else works the boat – check!
- A huge storm whips up the water and everyone panics – check!
- The disciple-crew wakes up the skipper and blames him for dereliction of duty – check!
- The skipper does not put on a life preserver but calms the storm – here’s a new twist!
- The skipper scolds the crew for dereliction of duty – check!

This story exudes action, drama and intrigue. What could be better? Actually, taken at face value, it’s quite entertaining. But I’ll bet there’s more than meets the eye.

When I make videos for our faith formation students, I advise them to write down their questions as they read a story from the Bible. We rarely get what’s going on on our first read. So, I did that too. Here are my questions:

- Where are they going in the boat?
- Is this for fun or do they have a mission in mind?
- Why can’t I calm the seas? That would save a lot of wear and tear on the boat and crew.
- Why do the disciples question Jesus’ identity? Don’t they know him by now?
- Without wind, how are they going to get to shore?
- How does this apply to me today?

Let’s see how far we get in answering those questions. Let’s look at the story again.

Jesus decides they all need a boat ride. We read that sometime after setting sail, they get into a sudden storm. It’s rough out there, and they’re taking on water. I imagine they may lose the mast and sails; any oars have probably washed overboard. Panic sets in. Rightfully, so. They know many boats sink in this kind of weather.

The disciples cannot believe Jesus is asleep. They wake him up and immediately attack him for not caring about their safety. After all, it was his idea to go boating. Jesus attends to the situation by removing the threat. He simply says “Peace” and “Be Still.” Problem solved; emergency over.

Jesus gets in a snipe at the crew: “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” The disciple crew now wonders “Who is this guy?”

Mark presents Jesus’ teaching in parable form. He uses lots of symbolism that the Jews of his time would have understood. He calls upon the Hebrew Bible for many references as a means of assuring them that Jesus’ words have fulfilled the teachings of their familiar texts. This story deals with very human conditions: fear, boundaries and trust.

How many times have we heard references to water in the Bible? Sometimes those references focus on the overwhelming power of water over us. The very first page of Genesis refers to the water as the “darkness covering the face of the deep.” It sounds rather ominous, doesn’t it? A few chapters later, Noah navigates the ark over a flooded earth as God tries to rid the world of wickedness. Who can forget the movie “The Ten Commandments” as Moses parts the Red Sea, rescuing the Israelites and destroying the imperial Egyptians? At times, we fear and respect the power of large bodies of water; it can suggest treachery, danger and possibly a deadly encounter.

Lake Gennesaret [pronounced Gen-sr-ei] – what Mark refers to as a sea – is a lot smaller than Lake Winnebago. It’s quite a bit shallower too. But he’s developing a theological story, not a scientific one. The word “sea” lends a feel of adventure and potential chaos. As Jesus calms the water, he not only saves the boat, but the chaos of a raging sea. We could even push this further to overpowering death itself.

We could suggest that this is only a demonstration of “dominion over the earth,” but that may be somewhat incomplete. If we know anything of Jesus, it’s that he stands for the power of love and life itself. Calming the water is more than an environmental display of force; Mark’s readers came to interpret this as a struggle between life and death itself. Not just for those in the boat, but for all people – the entire world.

Let’s turn to the theme of boundaries. Just after the sea calming story is another about the purpose of this boat outing. It’s sparked by the question of whether this was just a pleasure ride gone awry or was there a purpose to this trip? Clearly, Jesus was exhausted from preaching and healing people with various afflictions. He sailed away for relief, but after the storm, they continued their journey to the other side of the sea.

Just as we seek any port in a storm, Jesus specifically crossed to the other side but with a purpose. The people on the other side of the sea were Gentiles – “those non-Jewish people.” He had not preached to them before; he had concentrated on Jewish communities. He no sooner steps ashore when a man possessed by demons challenges him. The short version of the story is that he Jesus exorcises the demons by casting them out into a herd of pigs; the grateful man is restored to health. But the villagers are horrified of what has just happened; suffice it to say, it does not end well for the pigs. The villagers marvel at Jesus’ power. Yet they respond in fear, demanding that Jesus

leave immediately before he does something horrid to them. Back to the boat and the other shore.

In both stories, the disciples and the Gentile towns people react with fear when they see Jesus' power in action. Can we blame them? Fear is a great motivator; it alerts us to trouble so we can take action. What we do with that fear is the moral question of the sea calming story.

While the story does not exactly end with demonstrations of faith and trust, it does raise the issue. Jesus chides the disciples for their lack of faith. It may be easier to empathize if we consider this a lack of trust, rather than faith. The disciples are still newbies; they liked the "fishers of men" idea. But Jesus gives them a glimpse of exactly what they signed on for. More than just telling stories, he prepares them for taking on evil itself, just as he has done. Evil being anything that tears down the kingdom: exclusiveness, empire, fear, etc. Maybe add domination, exploitation, domination, fear, etc.

At least two stories surround the calming the sea story in which fear brings about a favorable response. We've heard one. The demonic man tormented on the other side of the sea, gratefully acknowledged Jesus' healing. He wanted to join Jesus, but Jesus instructs him to stay with the Gentiles, telling of his miraculous healing. A few verses later, we read about the hemorrhaging woman who touched Jesus' cloak comes up in a few verses cloak. She too approaches Jesus with fear and trembling, but overcomes it enough to just touch just his cloak. Jesus feels her touch, looks around to find her, then responds with "Your faith has made you well."

Let's go back to the question about how does this apply to us now? What boundaries do we encounter and how do we summon our sense of trust to respond to them?

The world has changed a lot since Jesus' day, yet in many ways, has not changed at all. Boundaries exist everywhere bringing about the same fears and challenges as from the Sea of Galilee. Empires still seek world domination; we experience "us" versus "them" every day in Green Bay and throughout the world. When Mark wrote the gospel, the temple had been destroyed. For the early church, its destruction was devastating. It was as if the center of their existence was destroyed, snuffing out any future for the newly formed church. We face similar cataclysmic threats: pandemic, world wars, and now space visitors!

What will it take for us to get into the boat and cross over the watery boundaries of our lives? What new experiences call us to kingdom building? We do many of them now: slicing up cucumbers to feed hungry citizens at NEW Community Shelter; rehearsing questions for those getting ready to take the American citizenship test; sending a "Thinking of You" card to someone unable to attend our services. Sometimes it means standing in vigil at the Correctional Institute or marching for social causes.

A few weeks ago, Rachel Westenberg spoke to us about the speaker from the organization We All Rise, an organization supporting African American people in Brown County. She suggested and I will attend the Juneteenth celebration in Green Bay on June 19 commemorating the emancipation of slaves in the U.S. At first, I was

apprehensive about attending as an older white woman, but I need not have worried. People of every size, shape and color filled the park. I met lots of people staffing tents that provided Juneteenth information, offered raffles, or sold food and plenty of T-shirts. I even saw some Union folks there. I'm not good at mixing with strangers, so I enlisted the help of two Union friends to make it easier.

Remember that question about "Why can't I calm the seas?" Perhaps it's not so far-fetched after all. In essence, we all "calm the seas" by crossing the boundaries.

Just as Jesus admonished, we can then tell others "Do not be afraid." We'll be in good company. Countless angels whispered, "Do not be afraid, Abram ... Mary ... shepherds ... Paul..." We'll repeat the words of Moses, Elijah, Isaiah and Jesus, "Do not be afraid" for each other. We, too, will share the Good News. When we do, we'll hear Jesus saying "Welcome Aboard!"

Lou Ann Norsetter
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
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Sources:

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