



Poland Presbyterian Church

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A Sermon by Brent J. Eelman

## "Be Still: A Meditation on Boating and Discipleship "

### Mark 4:35-41

*On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, 'Let us go across to the other side.'<sup>36</sup> And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him.<sup>37</sup> A great gale arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped.<sup>38</sup> But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?'<sup>39</sup> He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm.<sup>40</sup> He said to them, 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?'<sup>41</sup> And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'*

One of the earliest symbols for the church was a boat sailing upon the water. In the Dutch church, the word they used for Presbytery was the word *coetus*, which meant a fleet of ships. It may seem strange to us today that a boat would be the symbol for the church, but we need to remember the importance of boats to the gospels.

The gospel stories occurred primarily in the Galilee near the city of Capernaum on Lake Genesereth, (often referred to as the Sea of Galilee). One of the primary ways of making a living there was fishing and consequently boats were not a pleasure craft, the way we often view them today. Boats were necessary to life itself. Jesus was familiar with this fishing culture and spent time around boats. He retreated to a **boat** when he needed to be away from the crowds. He addressed a crowd gathered on the beach, from the bow of a **boat**. The first four disciples Jesus called were fisherman. They were with their **boats**, by the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

This morning the message is about water and boats, (two of my favorite topics). In particular I want to explore the image of the boat, both as a symbol for the church and individual discipleship. Three points: 1. Boats are created to sail. 2. The sea is not always calm. 3. Those who sail, need a life preserver.

### I

**Boats are created to sail.** Boats are not built for the purpose of looking at. They are not built to be in dry dock. They are not made only to be moored in the harbor or marina. Boats are built to be taken out on the open water. The harbor or marina is usually a safe place for a boat. It won't capsize there. It usually won't sink there. It is a safe place to keep a boat. But boats are not meant to be kept on shore or in the harbor. They were built to sail. Boating, at its best, is out on the water. There one experiences the pleasure of the elements, the wind, the currents, the waves, and the open air.

The church of Jesus Christ needs to understand itself as a boat. Boats need to sail!

Too often we have let the church stay moored in the safety of the harbor. Too often, we have denied our purpose and Christ's call to venture out on the deep, (the world), because we choose security over obedience. One does not catch fish by staying on dry land, nor can boats sail within the harbor. Mark included this story in his gospel to remind the church that discipleship would be both adventurous and challenging.

Followers of Jesus are called out on the stormy seas of life. The present day Church of Jesus Christ needs to venture forth from its safe places, in obedience to Christ's call, "Go into the world." We need to leave our comfort zones, cast our mooring, and see if this ship (the Church) will sail!

The sea upon which the church is called to venture is the world.

- We are called into the stormy world to bring the good news of Jesus Christ.
- We are called into the world to heal the sick, comfort the afflicted and bring hope to those who feel there is no future.
- We are called into the world to shine the light of truth in the dark corners of deceit and lies, and to be peacemakers in Christ's name.

I often use the expression "adventure" to describe discipleship. The irony of contemporary discipleship is that we play it safe at our own peril. After Pentecost, the Disciples didn't stay in the safety of the upper room. They went out into the world! That is the story of the church! This is the message that is declared in that old Gospel hymn:

Jesus calls us o'er the tumult  
of our **life's wild, restless sea**;  
day by day his sweet voice soundeth,  
saying, "Christian, follow me!"

Boats are useless, unless they sail. The church of Jesus Christ is a relic and museum, unless it casts its lines and ventures out upon the stormy seas of the world.

## II

**The sea is not always calm.** Last summer, I went sailing with my daughter. We were all excited and had been anticipating our sailing adventure for a while. We got the boat launched, we rigged the sails, we paddled out of the marina, and then we just sat there, going nowhere. No wind! The lake was like glass. We use the expression, "smooth sailing" but it was a bit too smooth that day. Thank goodness the seas are not always calm.

When Christians venture from the safety of the harbor, we will, at times, encounter rough seas. We can expect to encounter storms. These storms might take many different forms.

- They may be the storms of criticism we encounter when we try to tackle the difficult challenges of life.
- They may be the storms of ridicule proffered when we speak the prophetic word of truth.
- They may be the storms of schism that threaten to split the church, just as storms may break a boat into pieces.
- They may be the storms of loneliness and despair when we find ourselves wrestling in the Gethsemane of our souls.

- They may the storms of fear, when we enter into the hell holes of humanity ministering in Christ's name, remembering that he too, on the third day, descended into hell.
- They may the storms of discomfort, when we find ourselves out of our own comfort zones, whether they are geographical, theological or ideological.

Those who are faithful to the call of Christ, will experience stormy seas.

Some of you may be familiar with the life of Horatio Spafford. He was a Chicago Lawyer in the 1800's. He had a pretty cushy existence and then a series of events occurred that changed everything. He invested heavily in property in Chicago and lost most of his wealth in the great Chicago fire. Believing that he and his family needed a vacation, he decided to take his wife and four children on a vacation to England. Just when their ship was casting sail, he was called to an important meeting, and so he planned to take a later ship and meet his family in England. As fate would have it, the ship upon which his wife and family sailed (without him) collided with another ship and sunk at sea. Only his wife survived the shipwreck and she witnessed the death of her four children. Horatio took the next ship. As the ship passed near the spot where his children perished it began to toss in a storm. In the midst of that storm, as the waves caused the ship to rock, Horatio penned these words which we know in the hymn:

*When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,  
When sorrows like sea billows roll;  
Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say,  
It is well, it is well, with my soul.*

The life of faith does not always lead us to still waters. At times we find ourselves on a stormy sea, experiencing the peril of the elements. God does not promise us an easy life. God does not assure us that there will be no storms. God does not guarantee that life will be "smooth sailing". God does promise adventure. God promises to be with us. "It is well, it is well, with my soul."

### III

**Sailors need life preservers.** It is law in the state of Ohio that there is one life preserver on board the boat for each person. It is a good idea for the modern disciples, (you and me) who venture into the world to know what our life preserver is and its whereabouts.

When the boat containing the disciples with Jesus entered into the storm, the disciples were understandably afraid. The boat was about to swamp. They couldn't swim. Where was Jesus? Asleep in the stern!

'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?'

Two words were uttered from his mouth: "Be still!" and the storm ceased. "Have you no faith?" Jesus asked.

He asks the same of us.

- When we cry out in fear as we face the storms of life, He asks the same of us. "Have you no faith?"
- When we shrink from the challenge of discipleship, He asks the same of us. "Have you no faith?"
- When we repeat the clichéd reasons for halfhearted obedience to Him, he asks the same of us. "Have you no faith?"
- When we value our comfort over the call of discipleship, he asks the same of us. "Have you no faith?"

One of the primary doctrines of Presbyterianism is the "sovereignty of God". We believe that ultimately in all things, God is in charge. We believe that Christ is present with us when we journey through the storms of life. We believe that "that even the wind and the sea obey him." To live by faith is to hold tightly to that promise, and to live with the assurance, that "whatever our lot, it is well with (our) soul."

The church of Jesus Christ is like a boat; we are the sailors on that boat.

1. It was created not to sit in the harbor or in dry dock. **It was created to sail the seas...** Let us leave the comfort of our harbors and our easy, convenient faith and share the good news in the world that is beyond our marina.
2. **The seas are not always calm.** We should not be surprised when we are tossed to and fro by life's storms. That is the adventure of discipleship! Discipleship needs to be more like *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and less like the "Church Lady" on *Saturday Night Live!*
3. Know that **we have a life preserver:** Christ journeys with us, often silent, as one asleep in the midst of a storm. We can call on him in the midst of the storms of our lives, knowing that he travels with us. Knowing that even the winds and seas obey him.

Therefore, let us trim our sails, leave the harbor, and venture forth, with him. Let us not fear the storms of life... Christ will still the seas. This is the good news. Amen.