

Created to Sail

Psalm 143: 8-10, Ephesians 3:16-20

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Let me hear of your steadfast love in the morning, for in you I put my trust.

Teach me the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul.

Save me, O God, from my enemies; I have fled to you for refuge.

Teach me to do your will, for you are my God.

Let your good spirit lead me on a level path. Psalm 143: 8-10 NRSV

I ask God to strengthen you by the Spirit - not a brute strength but a glorious inner strength - that Christ will live in you as you open the door and invite this Source of Grace in. And I ask that you will have both feet planted firmly on love, and you'll be able to take in the extravagant dimensions of Christ's love. Reach out and experience the breadth! Test its length! Plumb the depths! Rise to the heights! Feel the power of the winds that blow! Live full lives, full in the fullness of God. The Holy One can do anything, - far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams! Not by pushing us around but by the Spirit working deeply and gently within us.

Ephesians 3:16-20 (The Message, adapted)

In the movie "Castaway," Chuck Nolan played by Tom Hanks is stranded on a desert island after his Fed Ex plane that he was on crashes. He is the lone survivor and for 4 years his only company is a volleyball that he names Wilson. Chuck tries again and again to escape the island on a raft he builds. He rows, and rows and rows, but he can't make it past the break.

Finally, after years of trying, he realizes what he has to do. And so, he fixes the raft once again and paddles hard until he is at the top of a wave and then he raises a sail and then the wind pushes him past the surf into the open ocean where eventually he is rescued.

That scene in "Castaway" is the central premise of the book *Sailboat Church* by Joan Gray. The subtitle of the book is *Helping Your Church Rethink Its Mission and Practice.* I recently rediscovered this book as I was preparing for our officers' retreat yesterday. She uses the metaphors and asks the question – Are we a rowboat church or a sailboat church?

Like Chuck's attempt to escape the island, simply rowing is not enough. Rowing will not get us where we need to be as a church. We have to imagine what it means to raise the sail and let the wind propel us where we need to go.

In Joan Gray's book, she notes that early Christian symbols include a boat as a symbol for the church. In Jesus' time there were two ways to power a boat on open water. One was to use muscles, most commonly by rowing with oars. The other was to harness the power of the

wind. When the early Christians used a boat as a symbol of the church, it was never a rowboat; it was always a sailboat. That is because on the day of Pentecost, a passage in the book of Acts, there is a sound like a rush of violent wind (Acts 2:1), Christ's promise of power became a reality. This presence empowered Jesus' followers and drew those who followed the ways of Jesus into a different way of living.

For these early Christians, church was God-powered, God-led, God-resourced adventure. They found they were caught up in something much bigger than themselves. Day by day, hour by hour, they were open to the Spirit and had a deep sense of Divine presence and guidance. They depended on the Spirit to provide what was needed to do God's work.

Over the centuries things changed. That miraculous experience, that transformative power, the promise of resurrection and new life seemed to be tamed. The church often denied powerful experiences of the Spirit. Keep it contained. Should we say – Don't rock the boat! A vibrant movement grew into a staid institution. As the church grew in numbers and resources and power and rules, slowly over time people – we- began to think "we can row our way forward. God has given us a basic agenda and then left it up to us to get on with it."

This often is reflected in a congregation with the attitude "We can do this! Or "Oh man... we cannot do this!" Then the church begins to focus only on the money it has or can raise as a definition of who a church is, the charisma and skill of the leaders, the number of volunteers. Gray says that a Rowboat church believes and acts as if its progress depends on its own strength, wisdom and resources. It's all about how hard, long and well people are willing to row.

In some ways, this idea of church is that the Holy One is a distant partner. Everything rests on us. Rowing is exhausting if we think the church is just one more human institution and no better or worse than any other. Rowing alone will not get us past those waves out into the open waters of God's mission and vision of the Beloved Community, the reign of God.

In contrast to a rowboat, Gray suggests that a Sailboat church moves into a place of trusting the Spirit, of being open, that God is at work in ways that are beyond our imagining. That we individually and collectively are willing to live into new questions, some experiments. When we raise sails, there are ways that the unthinkable move into the possible.

A sailboat church learns to raise its sails and let the wind of the Spirit fill them to speak and provide power for the journey. In reality, churches are both: we row and we sail. The challenge is to be able to tell when we are ignoring the power that is available to us only in the Holy Spirit.

Our passage from Ephesians, likely written by Paul from a prison cell, wants to encourage the early church to believe that one's circumstances don't have the final word. That it's not all up

to them. God is at work in and through them by the power of the Spirit, Christ's presence in their lives that roots and grounds them, that calls them to experience that love and connection that surpasses human knowledge. Heart and mind open to the Spirit.

He tells them through the power of the Spirit, God is able to accomplish abundantly far more than they could imagine. That promise is an invitation to put down our oars and raise our sails.

What if we imagine that we are a sailboat church? What might that look like? Let me offer a disclaimer. I have been on a few sailboats, but I am no expert on sailing. I managed to capsize a catamaran with my cousin on the San Diego Bay one time. What I am saying is that Gray's metaphor is something that spoke to me as we begin a new season and year with elders and deacons and as we discern our vision and priorities as church for this next chapter. A sailboat church relies on the Spirit, the sense of the Holy in us and among us and creation.

I would appreciate it if those of you who have done some sailing would send me your thoughts. How might I deepen and expand this metaphor with examples from people who actually been out on a sailboat?

As I reflect on the ways I see the Spirit moving in my life and our church, I see many ways we are raising our sails. We are not alone on this voyage. I see new teams forming, moments of awe and wonder, working together to navigate in a storm.

It was a joy to be part of the officers retreat yesterday as we talked about being a community, a crew of leaders. We listen to each other and to the congregation as a whole. We celebrate the moments in worship, in friendships, in book study, on Tuesday nights, on OWOS events.... the sense a deeper sense of the Holy. We serve together. We learn. We ask new questions.

In the next few months, the church leaders are working on a new vision and mission statement and logo. We will keep asking the question – Why are we here? Why do we gather in person and online? What is God calling us to be and do as a church in this time and place? We know our world, our country and community faces many challenges.

I like to remember that Robert Dollar, one of our founding members ran a shipping business. He came from Fallkirk, Scotland and helped start our church. He experienced the good news of Jesus and wanted more people to know this hope, this light. He funded a chair of New Testament studies at the seminary. Train ministers to teach this good news, the parables, the stories of healing and hope of women and men and children.

One of joys when we celebrated our church's history was remembering when the church may have sunk and closed during the Depression. Sandra Fisk, Barbara Royall and others told the stories about how the woman said – We will not let that happen. They kept finding ways to raise money to keep the church afloat.

So let's take that same courage into the future. We were created to sail.
Let's think about ways we can raise our sails as a church.

"On a day when the wind is perfect,
the sail just needs to open,
and the world is full of beauty." — Rumi

Amen.

Joan Gray, *Sailboat Church: Helping Your Church Rethink Its Mission and Practice*.
Westminster John Knox. (2014), notes from Chapter 1