

The Sailing Life

John 15:1-8 (selected verses)

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Jesus said, "I am the true vine and my Abba is the vine grower... You have been pruned already, thanks to the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit of itself apart from the vine, neither can you bear fruit apart from me. I am the vine and you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them will bear abundant fruit for apart from me, you can do nothing." *John 15:1, 3-5*

I appreciate your thoughts and stories about sailing and how we can have some fun with the metaphor of being a sailboat church. I have heard a few stories of the thrill of sailing out past the Golden Gate bridge from the Bay out into the bumpy open ocean. An adventure for sure for a strong boat and good crew. That will preach. And a few stories of capsizing sailboats on Donner Lake and on the Bay. I am working on how to work those stories into my sermons and theology. Keep telling me about your sailing experiences and thoughts about this metaphor.

Today I want to highlight some of the themes in the second chapter of Joan Gray's book. "The Sailing Life." We are sailing along in this season of the church year called Eastertide and we are approaching a special day 2 weeks from today – Pentecost. The story in Acts when the followers of Jesus are gathered after his death and resurrection. A wild story of the Spirit present in a new and powerful way.

As we navigate life as individuals and as a church, we can acknowledge this reality as Gray points out that sometimes it feels like we are rowboats – rowing with our oars, fighting the current, using our strength. And other times we are more like a sailboat, sailing. We are a mixture. But if God is calling us to do more sailing than rowing, what does that look like? And what are we noticing about the current needs people have that may draw them, us, to the Sailing life in a Sailboat church with the power and presence of the Spirit?

Two pieces I read about this past week struck me. The first was a story with the headline - **America has a loneliness epidemic**. There is an epidemic of loneliness in the United States and lacking connection can increase the risk for premature death according to a new advisory from the U.S. Surgeon General. The report titled "Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation," finds that even before the COVID-19 pandemic, about half of U.S. adults reported experiencing measurable levels of loneliness.

"It's hard to put a price tag, if you will, on the amount of human suffering that people are experiencing right now," Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy. "In the last few decades, we've just lived through a dramatic pace of change. We move more, we change jobs more often, we

are living with technology that has profoundly changed how we interact with each other and how we talk to each other." True for people of all ages. Two of the strategies mentioned were:

- Helping people to strengthen their social infrastructure
- Cultivating a culture of connection

Being a Sailboat church means we are called by God to be a place and community of connection. To be with, to care for, to build relationships, to abide. More on that soon.

The second piece was the release of a new book by a professor at UC Berkeley Dacher Keltner - ***Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life***. Keltner is a professor of psychology at CAL and the faculty director of the Greater Good Science Center. A renowned expert in the science of human emotion, Dr. Keltner studies compassion and awe, how we express emotion, and how emotions guide our moral identities and search for meaning. (2)

He writes about how Awe is mysterious. Revealing new research into how awe transforms our brains and bodies, alongside an examination of awe across history, culture, and within his own life during a period of grief, Keltner shows us how cultivating awe in our everyday life leads us to appreciate what is most humane in our human nature. And during a moment in which our world feels more divided than ever before, and more imperiled by crises of different kinds, we are greatly in need of awe. The topics in the book include the science of awe to stories of transformative awe to communal awe and musical awe.

A Sailboat boat church is a community and place where we can experience awe... in worship services, in silence, certainly in music – hearing it and making it together, in walking together outside, worshipping under the redwoods, serving others.....

Awe is about mystery – the Divine Mystery – the awareness of the presence of the Holy who is in us, around us, with us. Abides with us. A church that invites us to be people live a life of awe as we seek to follow the ways of Jesus.

What else does it mean to live the Sailing life? In her book, Gray invites us to consider that (3)

Sailboat churches experience divine-human partnership.

Anyone who has sailed knows sailing is as much work as rowing, but it requires a different kind of activity and effort. Sailors put up and shift the sails and partner with the wind to move the boat. So we seek to be in constant and deep relationship and partnership with God, the Holy, This holy dance is central to who we are.

Sailboat churches make nurturing a relationship with Christ a priority.

Right before Jesus told his disciples “apart from me you can do nothing,” he said “I am the vine and you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit.” Everything

flows from the relationship. No amount of work, skill, money, intelligence, or charm can take the place of this abiding relationship. Sailboat churches engage in intentional practices, communal and individual, that foster a deeper relationship with God. They create spaces and opportunities in church life for people to experience the presence of the Holy One, the Spirit.

Sailboat churches are shaped by scripture.

We read, reflect on, study and use words and images and stories from the Bible as a primary source of learning how to sail. We appreciate words of wisdom and truth from other holy books and poets. But scripture is the place where I start. To start from that dwelling place.

John's gospel has some of the most familiar Bible passages. In John 14, we read, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places." If you read this gospel, John is always talking about **dwelling places, abiding, staying**. It's there as early as chapter one. Two of John the Baptist's disciples see Jesus. They ask, "Rabbi, where is your dwelling place?" He invited them to come and see, so they went to his dwelling place and there they dwelt with him (1:38-39).

In the opening paragraphs of the book, the Gospel writer says Christ didn't stay far off in heaven. This presence of the Christ came here. Quite literally it says the Word of God "pitched a tent among us." Christ's dwelling place is right here. That is the great truth of John's Gospel – the incarnation, dwelling with us.

When the word translated as "dwelling place" becomes a verb, it becomes one of John's favorite verbs. He uses it no less than 41 times. To dwell means to abide or stay or remain. So, Jesus looks at his disciples on their last night together, and says, "I am the Vine, you are the branches. Stay with me and I will stay with you (15:4-7)." It's the same word. Stay with me, dwell with me, remain with me, abide with me and I will abide with you. (4)

What I hear Jesus promise is what the scriptures have promised to us elsewhere. Like the last line of the beloved 23rd Psalm: "I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever." This promise, invitation, is to live with God. Now, when our two boys heard that verse, I believe they groaned. "Dwell in the house of the Lord *forever*"? They have parents who were both pastors and were among the last to leave coffee hour on Sunday mornings. They thought they would not get out of church. They must have thought - We **will** dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Let's look a little more at "**dwell in.**" What further study revealed is that is the Jewish way of describing the relationship between the Eternal God and God's people. It doesn't mean you will be crazy-glued to a pew and stuck there forever. No, it is a way to speak of living in "the Way" of God, elsewhere described as a "walk." Walking in God's Way is the way we live. God's life becomes our life. All other distractions fall away as we dwell in this truth.

For the Gospel of John, the central invitation of Easter truth is dwelling with Christ. Death and resurrection are a mystery that means this Christ is alive and invites us into this new life and

transformation. If we dwell here and now, we live with the Holy One forever. Life goes on. The promise begins now and continues even when this life concludes.

So how do we do this?

The first thing we do is - We listen. We pray to screen out all competing voices, and we listen. So we listen, and we trust and learn to pay attention to the Spirit.

We can dwell, can inhabit, the words of Jesus. What if we were to inhabit the “dwelling place” Christ offers and truly sink into his words?

We might find that we are deepened. I like what Henry David Thoreau wrote about sinking into his hometown: “I have traveled widely in Concord.” Abiding there meant paying attention there. He noticed what he previously had missed.

One thing more: we live the life, the sailing life, the abiding life. We raise the sails together. We get on with living. There are friends to love, enemies to forgive, bread to bake, music to create, lawns to mow, meals to share, e-mails to answer, a forest to enjoy. And today we give thanks for those who offered the gifts of mothering and living – people, the women, who loved us and nurtured us and were there for us.

Sailboat churches are places of transformation.

We can let our hearts be troubled, or we can trust God who dwells in us and all creation.. We dream for an escape from the troubles of this world, or we can welcome the One in our midst who still speaks to our hearts and minds. We can jump around from place to place, looking for something, somewhere, that can give us peace, hope, and joy. Or we can abide and be at home with the Source of Love and be open to being transformed.

Let us be a church of love and connection and friendship.

Let us be a church that creates opportunities when we can experience awe.

Let us know deeply that Christ dwells, abides, lingers in us and with us.

Let us go on adventures as we sail together with the Spirit on this sailboat church and find new ports where we invite others to come aboard. Amen.

1) “America has a loneliness epidemic” May 2, 2023, NPR All Things Considered

<https://www.npr.org/2023/05/02/1173418268/loneliness-connection-mental-health-dementia-surgeon-general>

2) *Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life* By Dacher Keltner

Book Review by Jon M. Sweeney <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/28885/awe>

3) Joan Gray, *Sailboat Church: Helping Your Church Rethink Its Mission and Practice*.

Westminster John Knox. (2014), notes from Chapter 2

4) Bill Carter, “Abide With Me,” 5.7.23

<http://billcartersermons.blogspot.com/2023/05/abide-with-me.html>