

Texts: Ephesians 3:14-21
Mark 6:45-51

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The Sailboat Church

One day I was sitting in my living room and a gust of wind slammed against our home so violently that the house shuddered. Tree branches swayed violently, and I could see my neighbor's screen door swinging open and shut with the wind. It reminded me of the tornado scene from the Wizard of Oz. It came suddenly, and just as suddenly stopped. And there was peace.

The wind of the Spirit has created a disruption for your congregation and while it is happening it can be difficult to comprehend why it is happening, and how God will be using this event. So that is where our faith is called upon to pay attention to what God is doing, hold it gently in our gaze, while engaging our curiosity about how we are being called to respond to this situation.

Several years ago, my husband Charlie and I, and the elders of our congregation read a book by Joan Gray, entitled "The Sailboat Church." It's a metaphor that I am sure folks who live on an island can relate to. *(Ask about people who have boats. Poll how many have boats that primarily use paddles or oars, like rowboats, canoes, rafts, or kayaks, and how many have motor powered boats, and how many have sailboats.)* The author contrasts the sailboat with a rowboat. Two years ago, my husband, Charlie, and I, attended a cousin's birthday party in Gig Harbor, which included a ride on an electric boat that cruised along at 6 miles per hour. Along the way, we saw a man rowing a single boat and were surprised by how quickly he pushed ahead of the electric boat. Our cousin and others at the party are champion dragon boat racers. They demonstrate that teamwork can be a recipe for success – and I am confident that with all those arms paddling, they would quickly pass by a one-person rowboat. The same can be said

for what we can do together as a church. When we work together, we can accomplish far more than any one of us could accomplish on our own. But the one thing about human powered boats is that it is difficult to sustain energy. Our muscles tire, our energy wanes, and if we get out of sync with one another, or if one side is weaker, it becomes more difficult to steer the boat in the intended direction. So, at the bow of the boat is a drummer beating the cadence to help the team stay together. Churches need teams like this who share in the labor, invest themselves in the effort, and pull toward a goal together.

But the sailboat is a different kind of boat. Yes, it requires human skill and knowledge, but what propels the boat forward is not exclusively dependent upon those on board. A sailboat also depends upon the wind. And the wind varies, doesn't it? A skilled sailor knows how to study the wind and determine which sails to use, when to tack and when to jibe, and how to work with the wind – but unless a sailor engages a motor, it is always the wind that propels the boat.

The Hebrew word “ruach” means “Spirit”, “breath” or “wind”. It is used to describe an invisible power or force. The ruach appears in Genesis 1:2 in the very beginning of the creation story, when a great wind blows over the face of the waters. It is the breath that brings life into human beings; the wind that dries up the waters in the great flood which Noah and his family survived; and the power Moses credits for leading the Hebrews out of bondage. References to the ruach appear throughout the Old Testament and in the New Testament the Greek word for the same concept is pneuma: meaning “spirit,” “wind,” or “breath.” resurrected Jesus breathed upon his disciples and gave them the gift of the Spirit and on Pentecost, the Spirit comes upon the disciples with a sound like the rush of a violent wind. That Spirit brought gifts that transformed the disciples. After Jesus’ arrest, they had taken to hiding behind locked doors in fear. But after the Spirit came at Pentecost, they were courageous in bearing witness to the power of Jesus, preaching powerful sermons; bringing healing; enduring persecution; and discovering joy in the process of serving Christ they knew as their Redeemer.

From the time of the early church, a sailboat has been used as a metaphor for the church. It is the reason the World Council of Churches incorporated the metaphor into its logo, which includes the Greek word “Oikumene” which in English is “Ecumenical” and describes the church as one body stretching across the whole world. Even the words we use for the parts of the church include nautical references. The main area in which worshippers gather is called the “nave” which has roots in the same Latin word for “ship,” “navis” from which we get the word “navy.” Even church architecture often gives reference to the keel shape of a ship in the vaulting supporting the roof.

In 1986, a 2,000-year-old boat was discovered on the bottom of the Sea of Galilee, and it has been painstakingly preserved in a museum. It gives us a sense of the type of boat Jesus’ disciples would have used for fishing. Here is a contemporary replica which now resides in a Vatican museum. So, as we consider the gospel reading for today, you can imagine the disciples climbing into a similar boat.

The disciples have just experienced the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. It was a day etched into their memories. How could such a large crowd be fed with so little? And with twelve baskets of broken pieces left over! They could not comprehend what had happened. It had been a long day. Jesus ordered his disciples to launch the boat and go ahead to Bethsaida, where he planned to catch up with them later. Jesus remained with the crowd until they were dismissed, planning for some solitude on the mountain where he could pray. This is what renewed his Spirit and empowered him for ministry. It was an exercise of deep breathing: being filled with the life-giving, sustaining breath of God, the ruach; focusing on his oneness with God. Breathing in sync with God can equip any of us for aligning our minds and our hearts with God.

As evening settled in, Jesus could spot the disciples on the boat, straining hard with the oars, because the wind was against them. He saw they were struggling. He would not leave them to face this challenge alone. He desired to join them. The Spirit propelled him toward

them - and the route of the Spirit was the most direct – across the surface of the water. When the disciples caught sight of him approaching, they were terrified – who wouldn't be? Their minds were befuddled from what they had seen yesterday, their bodies were exhausted from rowing against the wind, and now a mysterious figure appears in the moonlight. But then he spoke, and they recognized the sound of his voice. “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” Then he got into the boat with them, and the wind quieted down, the waves calmed – and they were astonished. Wherever Christ shows up; wherever God's Spirit is present, things we thought were not possible, start to happen.

A rowboat church can be successful, like this U.S. Coast Guard whaleboat rowing team, or the 1936 UW crew team of “The Boys in the Boat” fame who won gold in the Olympics. Rowboat churches can also maneuver their way through rough waters, like white water rafters. The overwhelming attitude in a rowboat church is that God has given us an agenda to better this world and spread the gospel – all good things. But the predominate attitude behind this agenda is on what WE can do or what WE can't do. Our success or progress depends on our own strength, wisdom, and resources. Rowboat churches can function well, until fatigue sets in, outside factors create strong headwinds, or team unity begins to wane.

But sailboat churches, operate on a different principle. We know that our own strength is not sufficient, and that we must rely upon God's Spirit to empower us. We put down the oars and hoist the sails. We remember the powerful wind of Pentecost and how it transformed the lives of the disciples and set them on a new course to carry the good news of Christ's saving grace far and wide. When sailing becomes tough, rough waters surround us, sailboat churches lean into the knowledge that Christ remains with them. And Christ's Spirit will empower them. The Holy Spirit will fill them with a vision and give them a mission. And sailboat churches understand that God does not call them to do anything for which God does not also provide the means to accomplish it.

In a sailboat church, the members know that what they have or lack in human and material resources is not the decisive factor in what they can accomplish as a church. The dominant attitude in a sailboat church is, "God's Spirit can do in us far more than we can ever ask or imagine" (Ephesians 3:20). They view the church as being on a continuing adventure with a God who guides and empowers us to accomplish more than we could ever have dream.

I can tell that this congregation understands well what it means to be a Sailboat Church. You possess wisdom and a faith that reflects your intentionality to live as Christ's disciples, and you embody a heart of love and compassionate care that defines this congregation as having the heart and mind of Christ. And even more, you have the power of the Holy Spirit whom Christ describes as both a Comforter in times of distress, and a strength to propel us forward into the future. And as you hoist the sails of the church, catch the wind of the ruach, the Spirit, you are guaranteed to find yourselves being amazed at what God is doing in your midst.

Let us pray: O God, we give thanks for the work of your Spirit, blowing fresh breezes upon us and empowering our lives. May your Spirit stir within us and carry us into a God-filled, joy-filled, life-filled relationship with you. Help us to set aside our determination to work to create a future that meets our own goals, hopes, and dreams, and instead lead us to have hearts and eyes open to following you into the future you have in store for us. We trust in you to do in us, through Christ, far more than we could ever ask or imagine on our own power and resources. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.