

In the same boat

Mark 5.21-43

June 28, 2015

Tim Phillips, Seattle First Baptist Church

What a week!

I find myself in the same boat with the President this morning. Given the Supreme Court rulings on Thursday and Friday playing out against the backdrop of funerals for the nine people killed at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, I don't know if I should be laughing or crying. Actually, I've done a fair amount of both over the last few days.

Maybe the President is right. And the only thing to do is to sing "Amazing Grace."

Amazing grace is the testimony, the President said, that I once was blind but now I see. It is being given the capacity to see when we have lived for so long in blindness – it is to see what has not been seen, or at least to recognize that to which we have been blinded by will or ignorance or discomfort or subterfuge.

If we have been blind to the love and commitment of same-sex couples, well now we can see.

If we have been blind to the racism that is deeply rooted in our life together, then the actions of a young white man killing African-Americans in the sanctuary of a church during a Bible study, may help us see.

If we have been blind to the consequences of the unfettered right to own guns, well maybe – at last – we can see.

I suspect we are all in the same boat this morning – stunned to see something many of us thought we would never see in our lifetimes and horrified at seeing something that brings us face to face with the hatred and violence to which we have often been blind.

The grace that moves us from blindness to seeing is amazing grace. But it is also a tough grace.

Sometimes I find myself in the same boat with Carole Etzler who says:

Sometimes I wish my eyes hadn't been opened.

Just for an hour how sweet it would be

Not to be struggling, not to be striving,

But just sleep securely in our slavery.

Whether we want to or not, this one thing I know: we have to come to see ourselves as people who are all in the same boat. "Justice," the President said, "grows out of recognition of ourselves in each other."

Grace deliver us from seeing ourselves bobbing happily on a calm sea in our comfy little individual life-preservers. That way of seeing the world and each other will continue to make us blind to the reality that we are all in the same boat. We are born. We all die. And the best we can hope is that somewhere in the middle love wins.

I have been thinking this week about how widely we use the metaphor of a boat.

If we are talking about economic policy, someone is likely to say: "A rising tide lifts all boats."

The evidence, however, is that the ongoing reality of income inequality in our country means that a lot of people – millions of people -- are "missing the boat."

And that leads some folks among us to do some "rocking" of the boat.

They can be annoying and frustrating and they can rain on our parades. But I thank God for those who have been doing some boat-rocking.

After the marriage equality ruling the President talked about all the individual acts of courage that brought us to this day – children who came out to their parents and parents who loved them no matter what.

I'm thinking this morning of Walt Pulliam and his group of gay men in the 1970s that met upstairs in the gym.

I'm thinking of David Kile who officiated at one of those first same-sex weddings now 36 years ago.

I'm thinking of the preaching of Rod Romney and the social engagement of Steve Jones and the networking of Craig Darling.

I'm thinking of Cherry Johnson this morning. Thank God for those amazing poems.

I'm thinking of my friend Elizabeth. I wish she could have lived just another week to see this day. She helped to make it happen. She was always rocking the boat about something -- women's issues, racism, human rights, guns. I would see Elizabeth coming and I would think, "now what?" because, for Elizabeth, there was always some boat that needed rocking.

But I also want to say this morning that Elizabeth saw the truth.

As we are busy rocking the boat, let's not forget that we are all IN it. We don't rock the boat from above somewhere. We don't rock the boat as some demonstration that we don't need the boat or that we are better than the boat. To think we can abandon the boat is drown – alone.

Elizabeth knew the truth: If we are going to rock the boat, let's not forget that we are all IN it. So let's not get too high and mighty. Let's not forget compassion. Let's not forget that along the way to justice there will be some pain and loss.

Maybe I've been thinking about boats as a metaphor because many of the stories that are coming up on Mark and John take place in or around boats.

Like the one for this morning from Mark 5. In Mark 4 Jesus is in a boat with his disciples when a storm comes up. The disciples are scared to death but Jesus is asleep. As the storm rages, the disciples get desperate and they wake Jesus up and say "Don't you care that we are dying?"

Jesus says, "Peace. Be still." And the storm quiets and Jesus says that great line, "O you of little faith."

Here we are again in Mark 5: "When Jesus had crossed *again in the boat ...*"

The good news the gospel writers seem to be trying to get through to us is that God is with us in the boat. God – that power already at work within us to accomplish far more than we can ask or imagine – *that* power never misses the boat. And even if it rocks the boat from time to time – trying to shake us out of our blindness – that power is still IN the boat.

So Mark says ...

Mark 5: 21-24

When Jesus had crossed **again in the boat** to the other side, a great crowd gathered round him; and he was by the lake. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, 'My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.' So Jesus went with him.

Like the disciples in the previous story, this man is desperate and desperation is never pretty. Desperation makes us beg. It's hard on our pride. We recoil at it when we see it in other people because it reminds us all of how vulnerable we are. We would rather take a pass on that boat.

But Jesus is in that boat and he goes with this desperate father.

On the way, the story says ...

Mark 5: 25-34

...a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, 'If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.' Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease.

Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, 'Who touched my clothes?' And his disciples said to him, 'You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, "Who touched me?" ' He looked all round to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.'

So here is another desperate person. She knew, that according to the culture of the time, she was considered unclean because of her disease and no one was allowed to touch her. But, in her desperation, she takes matters into her own hands. She doesn't wait for Jesus to decide if he will risk touching *her*. Instead, she finds a way to touch *him*. And that act, Jesus seems to be saying, is an act of faith – someone taking the initiative to do something culturally unacceptable for the sake of healing.

What if faith is marrying same-sex couples 30 years before it's legal?

What if faith is rocking the boat?

What if faith is desperate people taking matters into their own hands? That's sort of an unnerving prospect.

But that seems to be what Jesus is saying.

And there is this odd thing that Jesus says to this woman, "Daughter, your faith – that initiative you took to touch me at the risk of being further condemned – that faith has made you well, now go in peace and be healed."

Okay, so you ARE healed. Go BE healed.

Healing isn't something that just happens to us. It's something that we keep making happen.

Marriage equality is a very healing thing for many of us, but not all same-sex marriages will be healthy ones. Healing isn't something that happens to us. It's something we keep making happen.

The funerals in South Carolina and the removal of the Confederate flag may be healing, but those things by themselves will not heal the open wound of racism. Healing isn't something that happens to us. It's something we keep making happen.

When the families of the nine who were killed offered their forgiveness to the young man who was the killer, they are recognizing that healing their broken hearts won't happen with an arrest. Healing is something you have to keep making happen.

“Your faith has made you well,” Jesus says, “now go in peace and BE healed of your disease.”

And then, “While he was still speaking,” people came from Jairus' house to say that it's too late. “Your daughter is dead; don't trouble the teacher any further.”

But Jesus says to Jairus, “Do not fear, only believe.” And he takes Peter, James and John and goes on to the house where people are weeping and wailing.

Jesus says to them, “Why are you making such a commotion; the child is not dead but sleeping.”

“And they laughed at him.”

“Then he put them all outside, and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him, and went in where the child was. He took her by the hand and said to her, ‘Talitha cum’, which means, ‘Little girl, get up!’ And immediately the girl got up and began to walk.”

The people laughed at Jesus when he refused to believe it was too late.

They laughed at him when what they saw as death, he saw as life just ready to wake up.

You know what friends?

Let's not be embarrassed by desperation because the truth is, we are all in the same boat; all desperate in our own ways.

Let's remember that healing isn't something that just happens to us. It's something we keep making happen.

And be sure of this: Nothing can rock the boat more than believing that it's never too late to see the possibilities of life waking up all around us and within us.

People may laugh when we talk that way.

Maybe they laughed when we were doing culturally unacceptable marriages 30 years ago.

Maybe they laugh at those families talking about forgiving the person that killed their loved ones.

Maybe they laugh at our lack of cynicism about the future because the realities of death blind them to the possibilities of life.

And the truth is: I'm no better than any of them because I once was blind – I am often blind – and the fact that I can see any of this is a testimony to that amazingly tough grace that brought me safe this far and the grace that leads me home.

In whatever language you choose to sing this next hymn – in Spanish or English – we are all in the same boat.

And today, if you hear God's voice in any language calming the storm, or healing your life, or raising the dead, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

The poems by Cherry Johnson, "Rhapsody on the 40th Anniversary of Gay Pride Seattle" and "Gone Before" are available from the author. President Obama's eulogy for the Rev. Clementa Pinckney is available online at www.washingtonpost.com. The words to "Sometimes I Wish" (my eyes hadn't been opened) by Carole Etzler is included in *Everflowing Streams*, ed. Ruth C. Duck and Michael G. Bausch.