

## **“Same Storm, Different Boats”**

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### **Breaking Down and Building Up**

There are two basic directions God takes humankind in this morning’s readings. In the Old Testament “Tower of Babel” story, God scatters and divides the peoples of the earth into smaller groups that are unable to communicate with each other. And in the New Testament “Pentecost” reading, God makes it possible for people who are divided into mutually unintelligible groups to find common understanding, in spite of their linguistic and cultural differences.

The reason God scatters, is because God doesn’t like what happens to people when too much power accumulates in one place. A civilization that is able to build itself up to a point in which it is ready to consider itself as a replacement for God, is not a good thing. And so, God sees to it that the tower gets knocked out from under them.

But it seems that God is also troubled by what happens on the other end of the spectrum. When people are so separated that they don’t understand each other, they are prone to feel threatened, to misrepresent what they see and to resort to violence to neutralize their perceived foes. And so God sends a Holy Spirit to restore the peoples

to unity in a way that puts a reliance on God back at the center, where it belongs.

### **The Covid Exacerbated Breakdown**

Over the past two years, it has occurred to me, as I'm sure it has to you, that our nation is being divided and scattered in a frightening way and that our unity in the Spirit of God's love is more and more fragile. It would be easy to say that this is all the work of a cynical political establishment. But I think it is worth considering other reasons that arise from our own experiences.

There was a poem, more like a treatise, that came out early on in the pandemic that I feel spoke revealingly to the situation we were in. It is called "Same Storm, Different Boats." I'd like to read it.

### **Same Storm, Different Boats**

I heard that we are in the same boat. But it's not that. We are in the same storm, but not in the same boat. Your ship can be shipwrecked and mine might not be. Or vice versa.

For some, quarantine is optimal: a moment of reflection, or reconnection. Easy, in flip-flops, with a whiskey or tea. For others, this is a desperate crisis. For some, it is facing loneliness. For some, peace, rest time, vacation. Yet for others, Torture: How am I going to pay my bills?

Some were concerned about a brand of chocolate for Easter (this year there were no rich chocolates). Others were concerned about the bread for the weekend, or if the noodles would last for a few more days. Some were in their "home office". Others are looking through trash to survive.

Some want to go back to work because they are running out of money. Others want to kill those who break the quarantine. Some need to break the quarantine to stand in line at the banks. Others to escape. Others criticize the government for the lines. Some have experienced the near-death of the virus, some have already lost someone from it, and some believe they are infallible and will be blown away if or when this hits someone they know. Some have faith in God and expect miracles during 2020. Others say the worst is yet to come.

So, friends, we are not in the same boat. We are going through a time when our perceptions and needs are completely different. And each one will emerge, in his own way, from that storm. It is very important to see beyond what is seen at first glance. Not just looking, more than looking, seeing. See beyond the political party, beyond biases, beyond the noses on our faces.

Do not judge the good life of the other, do not condemn the bad life of the other. Don't be a judge. Let us not judge the one who lacks, as well as the one who exceeds him. We are on different ships looking to survive. Let everyone navigate their route with respect, empathy and responsibility.

So I'm not completely on board with the conclusions here. I do think that judgment is important. If something is wrong it's wrong. But I do

agree with what the writer says about avoiding condemnation. The difference between judgement and condemnation is important.

What is so most powerful to me is the way the author reveals the inequalities in our society that we don't see when we imagine ourselves all to be in the same boat, and how being in different boats is separating us. And it is written in a way in which you can feel the frustration building as one example is piled on top of another.

I see myself as somewhere in the middle in all this. I have enough working class origins to be able to smell right away the hypocrisy of people who commiserate over the suffering as if they are experiencing it too, when they aren't.

But then I also recognize that, besides the fact that my cousin Al lost his life to Covid (it was a gut wrenching loss for us), I've basically sailed through the epidemic in a pretty comfortable boat. I missed out on a couple of trips I really wanted to take and had to wear an uncomfortable mask around for a couple of years. "Boo hoo for me," is all the working class part of my breeding can say.

### **The Way of the World**

There is another "boat story" that I think is pretty helpful in trying to understand the division in our midst. I don't know if you saw the movie

“Titanic.” It came out in 1997, over 20 years ago. One of the things that movie did was emphasize the social divisions on board the ship. There were “different boats” on board the ship, so to speak. The wealthy attended lavish parties in the ballroom and had the berths higher up in the ship. And then there were the folks in the middle and lower reaches of the ship living far less glamorous lives. Basically they were working to keep everything going.

When the ship starts to sink, there is this shocking realization that there are not enough life boats to go around. Who needs life boats on a ship that is considered indestructible? And just as shockingly, as the ship begins to lurch over, the hatches are batoned down on the poor folk below. I don’t know if this was partly to create some kind of air pressure or whether it was really a way of prevented the working people from getting to the life boats, which were quickly filled by the wealthy passengers.

The movie emphasizes the class differences, partly to create a more romantic and dramatic love story between a poor boy (Leonardo Di Caprio) and a wealthy young woman (Kate Winslet) and turns it into a real “tear jerker” when she survives and he doesn’t. But even in 1997, I don’t think it could be lost on an attentive moviegoer, that the Titanic

going down was a thinly veiled metaphor for what was happening to our country.

In some ways, I think that the Titanic movie is a modern day Tower of Babel story. Just as the Tower of Babel was the tallest building ever built, a symbol of human achievement, so the Titanic was the largest moving object ever built and in the same vein, the United States is the most powerful and technologically sophisticated nation that has ever existed.

It is a frightening metaphor, because if the sinking of that ship accurately represents what is happening in our country, it paints a horrifying picture in which everyone is seized by an underlying panic and rushing for a seat in a limited number of life boats. And which social group you belong to determines whether you survive. It is a vision of a world with not enough for everyone, in which the underlying reality is a fierce battle for a “seat in the life boat”.

I think “Replacement Theory”, the conviction that this country is being overrun by foreigners who will destroy the common culture and who seek to replace the inhabitants, fits neatly into this ominous vision. It is a theory that harnesses all the anxiety of a sinking ship. But the fact

that it paints such a riveting picture, does not mean that it must be true or that it has to determine our future.

### **Minority Experience**

I know that there is a racial component to this theory; that it is easy to assume that, if someone is Caucasian, that person is more likely to be an American than someone who is Hispanic or Asian or Middle Eastern. I often think to myself that someone who passes this church and sees the sign reading, Rev. Koyama, Pastor. will assume that, because I have a Japanese name, I must be a more recent arrival who has “replaced” Rev. Comstock and that this is a clear example of the validity of Replacement Theory.

But it is more complicated than that. I did grow up overseas. And indeed, my father was Japanese man who never gave up his Japanese citizenship. On that side, I am a first generation American. However, my mother’s family immigrated to the United States from Holland nearly 150 years ago. I am 62 years old and was put on my mother’s American passport at birth. I have been an American citizen my entire life. As a child I went to American schools overseas and was even required to recited the Pledge of Allegiance in elementary school. I served in the US military and, as far as I am concerned, I am every bit as American as the next person.

Neither is it my intention or am I part of anyone's plan to replace anyone. There is a shortage of ministers in the area and so there are plenty of churches available for anyone who is willing to be credentialed and apply. As far as I can see, I'm not replacing anyone. I'm filling a need. All I want is to live in peace and relative prosperity, which is what I think most people want, regardless of what color they are or what language they speak.

It is true that there are dangerous types in every community, but I have visited many countries, lived in several, lived in both big American cities and in rural areas and my experience is that the majority in every place are good people, not so different from you or I. And I think the fear we have is, for the most part, based on a lack of familiarity and on the fanning of our fears by people who find some advantage in pitting one group against another.

I know it sounds ridiculous, but in the last couple of years, I have often noticed older guys staring at me and I can't read their minds. I don't know if they would be interested in making friends or whether they see me as a hated foreigner and want me to get out. And it's hard to know

how much of my fear is in my own head, how much is fueled by the media, and how much of it is actually based in reality.

The honest truth is that I don't feel as though anybody treats me any differently than the next person. I have been treated very well no matter where I have lived. And the fact that I am sharing these feelings with you demonstrates the high level of comfort and trust I feel in the friendships I have with each one of you; in our covenantal bond. But if someone like myself, who has no real history of being threatened, is feeling increasingly insecure, then I can only imagine what many people of color or how the various LGBTQ people are feeling right now. Or imagine what it is like to be a white male and to wonder whether the person who is looking at you is thinking that you are the cause of all our problems.

### **Christianity**

Thankfully, I think that Christianity, when it is properly represented, provides us with an alternative to the grim and fear-based interpretations of history, we have been discussing.

Christianity that is true to its Biblical principles does not frame life as a fight for limited resources. We have only to consider such stories as the Feeding of the Five Thousand, in which the faith of Jesus somehow

turns five loaves and two fish, into enough for everyone, to see that this is true. Because, if this story is representative of Christianity, then ours is a religion that is willing to take what appears to be enough for say a dozen folks and trust that, if we move forward in the spirit of Jesus, there will be enough for 5000. The story of Jesus is a story that sees abundance as a consequence of faithfulness. And along with Jesus, who went out to find the one lost sheep, our faith teaches us that no-one is excluded.

In fact, the entire story of the early church after Pentecost, is about the addition of outsiders. After Pentecost, the Book of Acts reports that 3000 were added to the fellowship. And periodically, throughout Acts, we are reminded that even more are being added. Overall, what we see is that the story of the early church is a story about the inclusion of more and more people; turning strangers into beloved brothers and sisters.

Unlike replacement theory, or even the Old Testament conquest of Canaan, where the Israelites “replace” the local inhabitants, the New Testament story of Jesus and his church are a story of addition. (not replacement, addition) and as such it is a rejection of the idea that there is not enough to go around.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not an advocate of open borders. I am neither on the hard right or the hard left. I firmly believe that we need an immigration overhaul that makes sure people can only enter legally, that they can become citizens in numbers that are not overwhelming, and that our policies be as wise and compassionate as possible. I'm sure that is what most citizens want.

In any case, today is a day for peace and rejoicing. We do not have to be prisoners on so many little boats, or be forever bewildered by the unintelligible words of people in other boats. God has given us a Holy Spirit, to free us from our various forms of insanity to restore us to a shared reality that is centered on his love. And that is cause for celebration.

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