

“The Love Boat”
(John 6:1-12)

7/28/24
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I’m going to change the name of this morning’s sermon from “Loaves and Fishes” to the “Love Boat” and put more focus on the end of the Gospel reading, because it uses one of my favorite metaphors from scripture, the “boat” metaphor.

Boats are a metaphor for what became the church. In Jesus’s day, it was still a new community of faith. But we can understand boats to mean the faith of the church, like a shell, both invisible and visible, constructed to keep its people “afloat”, so that they don’t drown in the “perilous sea” of life.

The invisible structure of the boat is our understanding of the world; our theology that is centered on Jesus, our ballast point. That invisible structure protects our hearts and minds from the deadly currents of sin that come at us like threatening waves, and makes it possible for us to row toward the safety of dry land. And the visible structure is our church building, the ship itself and its crew is us.

Stories with boats in them show up in a number of places in the Gospels and, in each case, the meaning is shaped by the stories they are sandwiched between and by whatever details are added or taken away.

Feeding the 5000; the Fear of Scarcity

In this morning's reading the boat story comes after the Feeding of the 5000, a story that speaks to our anxieties about not having enough to eat; our fear of scarcity in general.

When Jesus asks where they can buy bread to feed the gathering of 5000, Philip is incredulous. He lets Jesus know that all the money they have would barely make a dent. Another disciple points out that five loaves and two fish are available. But then, he agrees that it is way too little.

Unfazed by this, Jesus sits them all down and, having expressed his thanks, he distributes the loaves and fish and everyone has all they need with much left over.

It is a powerfully optimistic story, one that is perplexing to our rational sensibilities, that counsels us not to be afraid that there will not be enough to go around. It is a story that invites us to trust in the power of Jesus to provide, no matter what the circumstances are.

When you think about it, isn't it true that so many of the anxieties that threaten to drown us, boil down to this fear of scarcity? What will

happen if I don't have enough money to feed the children or enough to retire on? How will I eat if there is a drought? How can I do everything the boss is asking me to do, when there just isn't enough time or energy? Who will I turn to for friendship, when my friends begin to pass away? All of these are questions that have to do with our fear of scarcity; of not having enough of the spiritual and actual food that we need in order to live.

And it can be a bit dumbfounding to have Jesus basically tell us to calm down. How impractical it seems to think that, under the apparent scarcity of resources, that trusting and giving ourselves over to him could meet everyone's need abundantly. It sounds like we are being asked to follow a religion of foolish optimism.

The Love Boat

Do you remember the old TV show, the "Love Boat"? The Love Boat was a weekly comedy series about life on a cruise ship. And every week the show would start with a new set of passengers coming aboard.

And as they came aboard, they were met by the genial Captain Stubbing, cheerful Julie the cruise director, Bernie Copell playing the doctor, and the rest of the crew, an interesting cast of characters, each

with his or own foibles and strengths, but all with basically kind hearts. As the crew watched passengers come aboard, they would pick up on give away signs that told them and us what kind of emotional baggage was weighing each passenger down. Whatever their condition, they were all starving for something that might find an answer on the cruise.

And at the end of each episode, the passengers would wave goodbye, somehow having been reenergized by something that had happened on the cruise. To me the show was a little bit too sentimental, and the way problems were solved so quickly and easily in one episode, often left me wondering why my own problems seemed to never find solutions. But on the occasions in which I did take in an episode, I always found myself smiling along with the crew as the passengers disembarked, in spite of my skepticism.

And what I liked about it was the mystery of how events played out. It wasn't as if every healing that occurred on the boat was the result of previous planning. For the most part, the crew were simply being true to character and just doing their jobs in a kind-hearted way; taking the opportunities that presented themselves, to be helpful. And through their adventures on board, the passengers would somewhere run into the miracle of grace and were able to leave the ship fed and restored.

The Church

I hope that you will not find it too silly or naïve to think of our church as being something like the Love Boat; that each week we get together for a mini holiday cruise, where we can step out of the routine of our week, hopeful that some wonder will occur that will free us from whatever baggage is holding us down.

And while the crew on the Love Boat were steadfastly focused on serving the passengers and with a desire for their well-being that extended beyond just their “job description” so it is with us; that everyone here is both crew and passenger; involved in giving of ourselves more than we have to, in a place where fear of scarcity is overcome by the reality of God’s abundant providence.

When church is over, all of us are going to return to a world where we are dealing with stormy waters, where we will be hit by waves of fear over scarcity, where we will experience moments of hunger that separate us from who we are. But we also have our weekly cruise on the Good Ship Montague First, where it is all about being fed by grace.

As I was writing this sermon, I wondered to myself whether using the “Love Boat” as a way to talk about the church might be too sentimental. I wondered whether we today are too cynical and suspicious of our

institutions to swallow innocent feel-good stories about who we are and the kind of community we can be a part of.

We live too much in a cynical world, where everyone is a potential suspect, and where security only comes from “winning” and having the upper hand. It is a world where you are either a winner or a loser and where the winners deserve to take all because they must have fought harder for the ball and were luckier and the losers deserve nothing, because they must not have wanted to fight hard enough for it. And we are encouraged to believe that this is the practical and realistic understanding of reality; that this is reality.

But that is only reality if we are fooled into thinking it is the only possible reality. The truth is that how we live is actually a matter of choice. We create it by the way we choose to live and we don't have to live our lives under the constant fear of scarcity. We can choose to live by a Spirit of generosity that trusts in God's power to provide. And we can believe that, if we all lived in the fullness of love, and stopped thinking of it as sappy, sentimental nonsense, everyone would have everything they needed, there would be no wars, and everyone could live in peace. And the more we live with that faith, the more that will be our reality.

The Love Boat begins its next cruise on Sunday, August 4th with Captain Jack Cooper at the helm. Tickets are on sale at the best possible price.