

# Three Boat Church

Would you pray with me?

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Over the years, I have discovered that a lot of churches of a hymn that they claim as theirs, one that connects with the members and conveys the mission of the church them for that place. Lot couples who have “their” song. The church I served in Houston had one of those. It was known to members as “The Boat Song.” If we went more than a month without singing it, someone would ask, “When are we going to sing the boat song again?” You heard Landes sing it today – “Lord, You Have Come to the Lakeshore.” It turns out that boast are a great way to talk about churches and about our life as disciples, so that’s what we are going to do!

Did you know that the boat is one of the oldest Christian symbols? It, the anchor and the fish were some of the first used by the first Christians. For those first followers of Christ, the boat symbolized the safety of the church in the hostile waters of the Roman Empire and conflict with Jews. The boat was also one of the main ways that Jesus and his disciples traveled from one side of the Sea of Galilee to the other (the other main way being on foot). So, the boat became symbolic of traveling with Jesus. As the hymn says, we leave our boat behind and get in his.

Now, in those days, no one was just a passenger. Everyone pitched in, trimming sails, rowing when necessary. The boat then came to symbolize the partnership between the disciples and Jesus who granted them, and us, authority before his ascension into heaven.



Boats became part of the architecture of the church. Here's a picture of my home church in Houston – St. Paul's UMC. It was modeled after European cathedrals. Notice the ceiling. It was built to resemble the upside-down keel of a boat. And this church is not unique. Many churches have that kind of ceiling and most people have no idea what it means. Next time you walk into a church, check out the ceiling and see if it resembles a boat.

Last week I introduced myself to you. This week, I want to talk about the Church and share with you my understanding of the church's partnership with God. We're going to do that by looking at three kinds of boats – sailboats, rowboats, and lifeboats.

I discovered the idea of sailboat and rowboat churches from a book by Joan Gray called *Sailboat Churches* (catchy title, right?). She points out that in Jesus' day, there were two basic ways of powering a boat – wind in the sails and oars rowed by humans. Jesus talks about wind power in his conversation with Nicodemus in John's gospel:

<sup>5</sup>Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. <sup>6</sup>What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup>Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." <sup>8</sup>The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.' (John 3:5-8)

The wind blows where it chooses. The wind fills the sails and powers it. Sailors don't control the wind, not when it blows or where. They can put up or take down sails, depending upon the strength of the wind. They can learn to navigate with the wind to arrive at their destination. But they don't control it.

For the earliest Christians, this image of the wind filling the sails of a boat reminded them that the Holy Spirit filled their sails and that the church was a God-powered, God-resourced adventure in which they were part of something much bigger than themselves. That's still true today, isn't it? We are still part of a God-powered, God-resourced adventure. And I can definitely affirm that it is bigger than ourselves!

The contrast with a sailboat church is a rowboat church. This passage from Matthew describes the disciples trying to row across the Sea of Galilee.

<sup>22</sup> Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. <sup>23</sup> And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, <sup>24</sup> but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. (Matthew 14:22-24)

Jesus gave the disciples a mission – go to the other side of the lake – and sent them ahead of him. But the wind is against them. They're trying; they're rowing as hard as they can. But the boat is just getting battered.

Rowboat churches may embrace the mission Jesus has given them, but in a rowboat church people act like everything depend on THEM to get it done. In a rowboat church we rely on our power to get it done, even when the wind is against us. Joan Gray describes being part of a rowboat church like this: “The bedrock reality of life in the rowboat church is that ‘God has given us a basic agenda...and then left it up to us to get on with it.’” The power in the rowboat church comes from the people and the effort they put in. The Spirit is absent.

You can tell when a church is in rowboat mode and has the oars out. Listen to what they are most concerned about. How much money do we have? Can we raise? Who's going to do what jobs? Who has the skills we need? What about the community? What can we do there? Now, don't misunderstand me. All those

questions are important ones to ask. But in a rowboat church they are the most important, even the only, considerations! Nowhere do you hear about the Spirit or the power of God in their list of considerations. Progress is only up to them and how hard they can row. As Gray notes, in a rowboat church “the actual experience of the personal presence of God is not much sought or expected in the church or in the lives of its members.”

Contrast the sailboat with the rowboat. In a sailboat church, we focus on letting God fill our sails, empower us, and move us, perhaps in unexpected directions. In a sailboat church, we remember and live Jesus’ words to the disciples: “Without me you can do nothing.” Our task in a sailboat church is to discern which way the Spirit blows, set the sails to catch the wind, and let the Spirit move us. We may not control where the Spirit blows, but we can tap into its power, which is greater than any we can generate on our own! Gray adds that when God becomes our chief guide and power source, “the unthinkable moves into the realm of the possible.”

Let me tell you about an experience I had being a sailboat church in Jefferson, Texas. We wanted to start a backpack ministry to feed children over the weekends and holidays when they wouldn’t have school meals. I reached out to the East Texas Food Bank and met with the woman in charge of the program. The Spirit must have moved her because when she got back to her office, she told Irene, who was in charge of getting food into our county, to call me. What I didn’t know is how underserved our county, one of the poorest in the state of Texas was, how much hunger there was. Irene called me and asked if we would be interested in starting a food pantry at the church. Figuring that bureaucracies move slowly and I had plenty of time to consult with the necessary committees, I said we would. Hah! When the Spirit is involved, things move fast!! The next week she called back asking if we were ready to go. I was flabbergasted! I hadn’t talked to

ANYONE. Not the Trustees, not Finance, not the Church Council. But that's not what I said. "Sure," I told her, and said a quick prayer that all those committees would be okay with that. Sometimes, folks, it's better to ask forgiveness than permission!

I remember going outside and sitting down, overcome with what had just happened. I looked up and said, "God, when you want us to do something, you don't kid around!"

You won't be surprised to hear that all the leadership was behind the decision. Which is not to say that everyone was thrilled. But when it's the Spirit supplying the power, there's no stopping us! Today, that food pantry has grown into a center that addresses poverty with GED classes, job fairs, and certification for various careers. And a food pantry. They even produced a cookbook that uses food available from the pantry!

Sometimes, I confess that being a sailboat church is a little scary. Nothing will remind you that you aren't in control like the wind of the Spirit! But it's also the most exciting, fulfilling ride you will ever have.

Don't you feel that way about the ministries here? Our outreach to the homeless. Our No-Barriers Bible Study. One church, two languages.

In reality, most churches are a combination of sailboat and rowboat. In fact, most real-life sailboats have another source of power available for those times when the wind is calm. But that's a secondary source of power, not the primary. There are times when a sailboat church needs to break out the oars, but primarily we are Spirit-powered, Spirit-led.

Then there's the third boat – the life boat. Have you heard this parable before?

On a dangerous sea coast where shipwrecks often occur, there was once a crude little life-saving station. The building was just a hut, and there was only one

boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea and with no thought for themselves went out day and night tirelessly searching for the lost. Some of those who were saved, and others in the surrounding area, wanted to be part of the station and give of themselves for the support of its work. New boats were bought and new crews trained. The little lifesaving station grew.

Some members of the lifesaving station were unhappy that the building was so crude and poorly equipped. They felt that a more comfortable place should be provided as the first refuge of those saved from the sea. They replaced the emergency cots with beds and put better furniture in the enlarged building. Now the lifesaving station became a popular gathering place for its members, and they decorated it beautifully and furnished it exquisitely, because they used it as sort of a club.

Fewer members were now interested in going to sea on lifesaving missions, so they hired lifeboat crews to do this work. The lifesaving motif still prevailed in this club's decorations, and there was a miniature lifeboat in the room where the club initiations were held.

About this time a large ship was wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews brought in boatloads of cold, wet, and half-drowned people. They were dirty and sick, and some of them had black skin and some had yellow skin. The beautiful new club was in chaos. So the property committee immediately had a shower house built outside the club where victims of shipwreck could be cleaned up before coming inside.

At the next meeting, there was a split in the club membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the club's lifesaving activities, since they were unpleasant and a hindrance to the normal social life of the club. Some members insisted upon lifesaving as their primary purpose and pointed out that they were still called a lifesaving station. But they were finally voted down and told that if they wanted to

save the lives of all the various kinds of people who were shipwrecked in those waters, they could begin their own lifesaving station down the coast. They did.

As the years went by, the new station experienced the same changes that had occurred in the old. It evolved into a club, and yet another lifesaving station was founded. History continued to repeat itself, and if you visit that sea coast today you will find a number of exclusive clubs along the shore. Shipwrecks are frequent in those waters, but most of the people drown.

When I hear this parable, I think of the great Fanny Crosby hymn “Rescue the Perishing.” Do you remember some of the lines? “Rescue the perishing, care for the dying, snatch them in pity from sin and the grave...Rescue the perishing, care for the dying, Jesus is merciful, Jesus will save.”

We are lifeboat crews, braving the stormy seas to rescue those in the water, pulling them to safety. As one person remarked, the church is the only institution that exists for the benefit of people NOT already in it. We are here for the sake of others, not ourselves.

We are living that now in this pandemic. We long to be together again, to be the church family that we were in March, but we understand that, as Jesus says, we must deny ourselves and be a servant to others. If we must maintain social distance to protect not just the health but the very life of the vulnerable among us, the we worship online and find new ways of connecting with God and each other.

Sometimes, we may forget the mission that Jesus gave us. Like those members of the lifeboat station, we start thinking about how to make the station more comfortable and then start using it for our own social gatherings. Our original purpose, our mission, is forgotten or, worse, seen as irrelevant and an imposition. Let me remind you of our mission. It is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. And this church is a missional outpost, a lifeboat station, for the kingdom of God!

Let's be a three-boat church. Let's raise the sails to catch the wind of the Spirit, not afraid to go where the Spirit blows. Let's be ready to row, if necessary, always remembering that the Spirit is our primary power source. Let's keep going out into the seas to rescue those who are drowning, bringing them to safety and helping them forge a relationship with the One who saves us. Amen.