

“Set Sail”

Rev. Greg Watling

First Congregational UCC, Gaylord, MI

Sunday, May 30, 2021

Texts: Colossians 2: 6-7; 3:1-17 and John 15: 1-8

Imagine yourself out in the middle of a lake in a sailboat. The wind is good and from a good direction. You know where you are headed (not lost). You have everything you need to move, but you are not moving. How come?

(Congregation guesses). The reason you can't move? You never put up the sail. I may not know much about sailing, but I know that there is zero chance you are going anywhere as long as you did not raise the sail (except for maybe where the waves take you). It's true in the life of faith as well. The Holy Spirit can be blowing all around you (which it is, by the way), but you are not going anywhere spiritually until you raise your sail. You'll just sit there, going nowhere, probably frustrated, and mad at God, the church or whoever else because you are not going anywhere. However, you're not going anywhere because you have not raised your sail and caught the spiritual wind. God can be all around you, within you, above you, below you, everywhere, and yet you're not moving spiritually. Could it have anything to do with you?

Brian McLaren begins this chapter in the book we have been following, *We Make the Road by Walking*, in this way:

The wind can be blowing, but if your sail isn't raised, you won't go far. You can be surrounded by oxygen, but if you don't breathe, it won't do you any good. The sap can be flowing, but if a branch isn't connected to the vine, it will wither. If you don't have kindling and wood in your hearth, a lit match won't burn long. It's the same with the Spirit. We are surrounded with the aliveness of the Spirit. All that remains is for us to learn to let the Spirit fill, flow, and glow within us.

I've met many people along the way who believe that God is so far away...up there somewhere (pointing up) ... and he/she/they will only be encountered upon our death. I'm not sure what God does in the meantime in that kind of faith, but I do believe that it makes the person caught up in these practices pretty lonely. Where is God when you need her? Why doesn't God respond when I call? I can't feel anything in my faith, why won't God fix it? Why do I feel like I'm not growing, or not getting anywhere?

Other people feel God is transactional. I'm good and God gives me good things. I have not good things, like cancer, a financial fallout, a divorce, whatever, and God did it to me because I did something, or several things, wrong. It's a tit-for-tat kind of faith where God is constantly settling accounts with us little people based on whether we do the right thing or the wrong thing. And the only way to

know what is right or wrong is to read the Bible. A good document that points us to God, but hardly the sole participant in our relationship with a living God. There is little in the Bible to indicate God never changes or that God is divorced from this world. Yes, you can find instances where the writer of the scripture interprets the world in this tit-for-tat fashion. At the same time, there are scores of scriptures where God is moving and active in the world, in ways understood and not understood.

What if God is constantly present all around us, even in the air we breathe. Every time we breathe in we breathe in God, and every time we breathe out, we breathe out God. And all because there is air to breathe. We did nothing, other than being created, to “earn” our breath, and yet every day, all the time, there you are and there I am, breathing. We even say we breathe as an “involuntary” function of the body. We do nothing to decide to breathe, and yet we breathe. We do nothing to earn our breath, and yet we breathe. But sometimes it’s necessary to pay attention to our breathing. Sometimes we’re breathing too heavily, which can indicate stress or a problem in our body (yes, of course, it could just be you ran a mile!). Sometimes our breathing is challenged by asthma, or other disease. The worst effect of Covid-19 is the inability to breathe, as far as I know. Breathing is critical, but poor breathing makes us poor singers, poor

athletes, poor instrumentalists, and the list goes on. Deep breathing, which is often intentional, calms us, helps us to think more clearly, restoring equilibrium to our bodies. Every behavioral therapist knows that deep, intentional breathing does many good things. And although we can breathe without trying most of the time, intentional breathing gives very specific benefits. Spirituality is the same way. We can engage God in the Spirit every second of every day, but to make the most of our engagement, we are called to “breathe deeply” in the spirit. To intentionally engage.

That’s what I, and I think McLaren, mean by raising your sail. You can still move spiritually without it. But you’ll move slowly and may become frustrated at your lack of movement. But if we can raise our sail, we might be driven toward a destination we cannot now imagine. And yes, that takes work. You can engage God with no effort at all because that is who God is. However, you cannot go deeper and further with the Spirit without some level of work. That is not because the Spirit is not available, but because your and my own spirits cannot or will not breathe deeply. McLaren says it this way:

When we desire to be filled with the Spirit, the Spirit begins to transform our desires so that God’s desires become our own. Instead of doing the right thing because we have to, we do the right thing because we want to –

because we are learning to truly desire goodness. Once our desires are changed, a revolution is set in motion.

A lot of people struggle with how it is that we engage the Spirit. McLaren uses how we learn to walk as a metaphor for how we get there. Sometimes we crawl, roll over, learn to walk, and sometimes stumble along the way. In other words, we just decide we want to “catch the wind” and we try opening our heart and our mind and our own soul to the already moving God. “Jesus,” McLaren tells us, “used another vivid image to convey the same reality: a branch abiding in a vine.” If it were separated, it would die. I don’t believe we can completely separate ourselves from God, but we can choose not to take in more than the basics of God connection. In fact, I believe it is the center of the problem of most people of faith, let alone people struggling with faith, we simply get enough of God to survive, but not enough to really grow deeply. And just like shallow breathing, a vine with only minimal nutrition may survive, but it cannot thrive. Same is true for you. Way too many people in our culture are willing to survive by shallow breathing our faith. No wonder we drop it so easily. If a church is only shallow breathing, it cannot survive even a momentary loss of breath.

We are called to breathe deeply of the Spirit, to set our sail and ride the waves as we're pushed by the wind of the Spirit to far and distant lands.

McLaren continues,

If we don't give up, as mile adds to mile, each of us will have some stories to tell...stories of how the Spirit guided, empowered, inspired, restrained, sustained, and trained us in the fine art of aliveness. And that's another great blessing of being part of a community of faith. Along the way, we gather around a table or campfire and share our stories about the journey so far. We share our joys and sorrows. We share mistakes we've made and falls we've taken and lessons we've learned. We share ways in which we've experienced the Spirit moving in us among us, and through us. Through this sharing, we encourage each other. And then we get back on [the water].

The strongest churches going forward, I believe, will not be the mega churches with all the bells and whistles (well, unless they have powerful small group ministries), but will instead be small outposts of community, rooted in faith, where people come and share their stories...stories of a God who will never let go of you, but who is best experienced in deep, powerful, slow breaths.

Churches will have to be communities again, which, I'm afraid, many of them no longer are. While our beliefs in the church will cost us some participants, we will gain far more not only in number, but in depth of relationship, if we encounter the world together. There must be something different about being part of a community of faith, or people will continue to sail on their own waters of

individualism. The call for church is to be deeper, wider, inclusive, open, and most of all dialogic...a fancy way of saying listening as well as speaking...to engage people of any age and social background.

Honestly, that is what I most love about being here in Gaylord so far. I experience here a depth of relationship that I have experienced in pockets of church members, but here it seems to be community wide. Honest, face-to-face dialogue, even in the midst of disagreement...and participation in something bigger than ourselves. If we can keep doing that, and doing it better, and keeping honest relationship with whoever will grace our doors, we will be here for a long time. We may never be any bigger. We may have some of the problems we have always had. But here's what will happen, and this matters most, we will have partnered with God to change lives. Again, quoting from McLaren:

Sadly, lots of people get distracted and lose their way. Instead of continuing to walk in the Spirit, they slow down to look back proudly on how far they've come. They become highly impressed by all they've learned – theological concepts, Bible lore, religious history and so on. Pretty soon, they come to a standstill and brag about themselves, comparing themselves to others who haven't walked as far or fast or cleverly as they have. They form little encampments, sitting around day after day, quarreling about this or that fine point of theory. Pretty soon they're so out of shape they give up walking altogether and specialize in talking about the way others walk.

That's their choice. But for us...let's keep on [keeping on]. However far we've come, there's far more ahead to explore. The Spirit is on the move, so let's keep moving, too.

A community of the Spirit, whose primary goal is to bring others along the way. No matter who they are. No matter where they are in the journey. A community of welcome. A community of passion and purpose. A community in a time where there is so little real community. Warts and all. Rooted in love.

More on that next week.

In the many, many blessed names of God. Breathe deeply. Amen.