

Title: Don't Forget the Other Boats – Mark 4: 35-41
Sermon prepared and preached by Rev. Don Hammond
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When I was a child, I heard my father tell a story of a terrible event that happened in our family many years ago. It was a story of his grandmother's death. She, Ali, died a tragic death because of an unusual storm. It happened near St. John's, Newfoundland. Her husband, my great grandfather, was a ferryboat captain and ferried people between Portugal Cove and Bell Island. The house they lived in was on a point that was across a cove from the grocery store. In the winter the ice would be blown into the cove and it became a short cut to the store. It was an "ice pack," which is many pieces of ice being held together by the wind that came in from the ocean.

Once or at most twice each winter the winds would change and blow out to sea. Such a change was sudden and dramatic. Ali had three children and was far along in pregnancy with her fourth child. On a cold winter day she and two neighbor men stepped onto the ice pack with the store as their destination. While on the ice pack, the wind reversed. The two men were able to leap from one piece of ice to another and reach safety, but my great grandmother was unable to jump at that time in her pregnancy. The wind was pushing her out to sea on a piece of ice. Rescue boats were launched, but the heavy wind quickly pushed her out to sea and beyond the reach of the rescuers. About a week later she was found at sea frozen to death on the piece of ice.

Several years ago I traveled to that place of my ancestors and learned more about the lives of my great grandparents. St John's was a community divided by religion, Catholic and Protestant. There were three different clans with the same family name as my ancestors, one Irish, one English and one Scottish. One family clan was Roman Catholic and the others Protestant. During my visit it became obvious to me that some of that religious tension and separation, remains alive.

My great grandfather Philip was Church of England and Ali was Roman Catholic. Philip had a disdain for the Roman Catholic Church. While examining archives, I found church records of marriages and learned that my great grandparents were married in the Roman Catholic Basilica and an addendum on the document reads, "Service not paid for." This must be a genetic condition of my family because this is how members of my family would lodge a protest. He loved Ali enough to marry her in the Roman Catholic Church, but it must have tormented his deepest prejudices.

The gospel reading tells us that Jesus and others were in a boat being taken to the other side of the lake when a terrible and unexpected storm developed. The boat was being swamped and in danger of sinking, and their lives were in peril. What is easily overlooked as insignificant to the story is what is written as the story began. It reads

"...And there were other boats"

"Other boats," what does that have to do with Jesus? An assumption made by many scholars and Biblical commentaries is that the others in the boat with Jesus were his disciples. Nowhere is that made clear, it is assumed his disciples were in the same boat with Jesus. We know that at least 4 of his disciples were experienced fishermen who spent their lives fishing that same body of water. Why would they be afraid and uncertain of what to do in a storm that must have been similar to others they faced while fishing? Perhaps it was not all or even some of his disciples sharing the same boat as Jesus. Perhaps more significant questions are; is it important to know who was in the boat with Jesus or who was in the "other boats"? After all, everyone was in the storm, regardless of which boat they were in. Everyone and every boat were in danger of peril and then Jesus calmed the waters. The waters were calmed for every person and every boat. There was not a circle of calmness that surrounded solely the boat of Jesus while the others were left to struggle and perish. Jesus gave no litmus test beliefs, creeds, life styles, or character to those in peril in the tempest. What he did for one, he did for all. Jesus did not forget the other boats that were also threatened by the storm.

We are the Church and among the responsibilities entrusted to us is recognizing that we are not the only boat, and our task is more than safeguarding our own well being and surviving any storm. Our task is to be caring for the other boats in the storm as well.

- We are surrounded by boats filled with people who are being overwhelmed by the storms that are sweeping them out to sea
- We are surrounded with boats filled with people who have no Jesus to awaken in the stern and calm the seas
- We are surrounded with boats filled with people who crave peace but find no peace.
- We are surrounded with boats filled with people who live in fear.

Years ago I lived in an oppressive fear for one long week. Our younger son was diagnosed with Ewing sarcoma, a very serious bone cancer that is rare in the young. We rushed him to Children's Hospital in Seattle and for two days he was run through a battery of tests. For two days Nancy and I sat and waited in the Children's oncology unit of the hospital. There was nothing I could concentrate upon to ease my fear for his life. I waited in terror. Surrounding us were children fighting for their lives. Surrounding us were other boats in the storm. Parents and grandparents were sitting and waiting just as we sat and waited. For a while we waited in a small room with chairs against the walls except for a box of toys that was in the corner. The chair I sat in was next to the door. Across the room was a woman who also sat and stared. I sensed a person standing in the doorway staring at me. It was a little boy who had no hair and wore a robe. Around the robe was a belt and stuffed in the belt was a toy plastic sword. I encouraged him to enter and play with the toys but he stood there staring at me with his hand on the toy plastic sword. He was not going to come into that room. The woman across the room then spoke. She said, "that is my grandson, he is 4 years old. In his four years he has been poked, prodded, injected and cut more times than you and I have experienced in our lives combined. He won't come in here because you look like a doctor." We found another place to sit and wait, a different boat.

At the end of the second day, and many tests, the results were in. Our son did not have cancer; he had a green stick fracture leg that appeared to be sarcoma on the MRI. My relief was beyond description. Once again the sun was shining. Once again tomorrow was not a bad thing. Once again I could smile. One of the physicians walked with us through the hospital and finally said: "I don't get many chances to give people good news."

As we walked out of the children's oncology unit feeling ecstatically good, we walked by children patients and their parents. What I saw in them was the peril of the storm that they were still fighting against. I wanted for them what I received. I wanted them to be rescued from the storm that threatened the boat I was in. I wanted them to once again have tomorrows that would not be bad. My days in the children's oncology unit changed me. Though I had neither magical words nor ability to calm the troubled waters for their boat, I now have kinship with the other boats in such a storm.

Someone in the boat said to Jesus "*Master, we are sinking! Do you not care?*" "Master, do you not care that there are boats beyond our own that are in danger of sinking? Do you not care that the wind is carrying them beyond the reach of rescue? Of course he cared. Jesus calmed the seas, minds, and fears of those who faced peril, and now the question is ours to answer, "Do we not care?" Do we understand our kinship and connection with the boats that surround us? Do we understand the fears, brokenness, and loss of hope by those in the other boats? Do we understand that it is not only about our boat and our safety?

Perhaps the answer to those questions will be determined by how our deepest prejudices are tormented. My great grandfather married Ali in the Basilica, and I am certain that he was deeply tormented by his prejudice and disdain for the Roman Catholic Church, but he did marry her where she needed to be married. Why did he cave? Why did he have his marriage blessed by the very church he resisted? He could have avoided the entire problem by falling in love with someone from his own boat. He did it most probably because his love for Ali was greater than his contempt for the church.

Yesterday I sat with many of you at our church display table at Pride Day Celebration. Our banner says, "All are welcome regardless of where you are on your journey." Several of the people that stopped asked this question: "Do you really mean it? Will I really be welcome?" Our answer was always "yes, you will be welcomed and have a place among us." There are other boats in the storm.

We too are expected to be in love with those in the other boats. Our care and love must be stronger than any contempt. That love may create tension, and it will require us to see in new ways, to create community that connects, to acknowledge our kinship to all others. It will have a cost and make great demands upon how we live our lives, but Don't Forget the Other Boats.

Story: Many years ago along a very rocky coastline, there was a small community of people. They were good people and always concerned about one another. There was one problem they were constantly facing. Because of the rugged coastline there were frequent shipwrecks and many sailors died.

A small number of the townspeople gathered one evening to talk about the shipwrecks and consider if there was something that could be done. Their conclusion was that a "life saving station" could be built with a boat. That way, when a disaster happened, they could ring a large bell and those that were fit, could row out and attempt to rescue the shipwrecked sailors. The community thought this to be a good idea and the volunteer lifesaving station was organized.

After a couple shipwrecks, they noticed that better training would improve their efficiency. Therefore, every Wednesday evening they would meet at the beach and train, and they did become better. More sailors' lives were saved. Word spread to the nearby communities of this good service and people would travel to be part of the work

In time, they decided it would be helpful to erect a building near the beach so they would not need to train in the rain and cold. Everyone in the community contributed and they put up a little building with a stove inside to keep the cold wind off of them.

The building was wonderful! It was so good that it became the community center and on special occasions they would have feasts or celebrations and

everyone would come and enjoy themselves. Again the word spread, and more and new people moved to the community simply to be part of the wonderful work.

After a little more time, word continued to spread and more people wanted to become part of the good work but the fine building they had became small, and friction began. One group said: "Let's limit our lifesaving station to members and all members will pay dues and when people don't participate, we will not include them." Another group said, "No, let's put up a bigger building to accommodate all the people." Yet another group said: "No, let's move our building to another place that is closer to our homes and better suits our needs."

They did just that. They built a more beautiful building in a better part of town and they had wonderful dinners, great programs for the children and themselves, and just about everyone loved the new lifesaving station.

To this day, that lifesaving station still stands and the people are proud of it. The only problems are that the ships are still wrecking on the rocks and the sailors are still dying.

Don't Forget the Other Boats.

Amen.