

## Sailing on the Ship of Faith

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November 2, 2008 Matthew 8:23-27

I don't know about you, but I can feel the excitement and enthusiasm in the air. The anticipation has been mounting throughout the month of October, so much so that we needed an extra hour of sleep this morning. The clanging and banging emanating from the shipyard has now ceased. The champagne has been chilling – virtual champagne, anyway.

So now, out of dry dock and ready to sail, we are pleased to unveil for her inaugural voyage – “The Spirit of Third Church.” And in the spirit of Third Church, and in the spirit of the Spirit of Third Church being a StewardSHIP, I'd like to call out “all aboard.”

This past month you have heard about destinations and ports of call. You have received descriptions about what is needed to keep the Spirit of Third Church afloat and shipshape. You have received boarding instructions, and, we hope, received your ticket in the mail this past week, in the form of a pledge card. If not, there are extra tickets available in the red friendship pads. At the conclusion of the sermon and during the singing of the hymn(s), you are invited to come forward with your completed pledge card and place it in the basket. Then, step up to the boat, where you will be given a lamp, a lighted window in the form of a sticker to illuminate a cabin.

Sometime in August, an incredibly creative committee launched this theme, and we've had fun with it ever since. We've laughed at all of the possible uses of nautical terms, some promising, some less so. You've heard the best of them this past month. What you didn't hear were any references to “Mutiny on the Bounty,” “Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald,” “Gilligan's Island,” “The Love Boat.” (You will no doubt remember “Love, exciting and new, come aboard, we're expecting you.” Since then, several pundits reminded me of other left-out references, such as “The Good Ship Lollipop” or “Captain Kangaroo.”) You've heard nothing at all about the Titanic, especially nothing about the Titanic.

In fact, as the financial waters got choppy in the past month, with the waves of the market crashing into the hull of the ship – never “boat,” I've been reminded, but always “ship” – not once did we consider switching themes. Not once, and with good reason.

From the beginning, when God created order from chaos, water has been a central element in the biblical story, and the vessels sailing upon it. Noah's ark, the floating menagerie and manifestation of God's covenantal community. Jonah's getaway boat, over whose side he was unceremoniously tossed, leading him to Nineveh. The apostle Paul, sailing from city to city to city, proclaiming the gospel he had received.

And Jesus to be sure. There are many stories from which to choose. Jesus, standing in a boat off the shore, preaching and teaching. Jesus, telling his fisherman followers to throw their nets over the side of the boat, where they bring in a huge catch.

And this morning. In a boat with his disciples. Not a cruise ship, but use your imagination. The wind comes hard across the lake and waves overwhelm the boat. Jesus remains asleep through

the whole episode. The disciples, however, are freaking out. They wake Jesus up, a risky move to be sure, literally at the point of being scared to death. Jesus rebukes their lack of faith, but nonetheless heeds their distress. Things calm down. The disciples are amazed.

That's why in part the Stewardship Committee was intrigued by all this, and why these images and stories are worth considering.

You have received several mailings. The case has been well-made and the needs well-articulated. You have, we hope, prayerfully considered all of this and made the kind of faithful decision we are all called together to make. A modest increase is sought, and an increased level of congregational participation.

There's not much for me to add, and if I could convince you somehow to increase your financial support with a mere sermon, I might consider another line of work. What I can do is underscore the need, acknowledge the reality, and provide a little bit of encouragement.

Do you remember learning the Christmas carol "I Saw Three Ships?" Very British, very Victorian. "I saw three ships come sailing in, on Christmas Day, on Christmas Day. I saw three ships come sailing in, on Christmas day in the morning." Why there are three ships is never explained in the carol, rather than two, or four. Some suggest that it was a reference to the Trinity, but that is not clear.

Just like the Nina, the Pinta and the Santa Maria, and not one more, or one less.

But I will latch on to the notion of three ships, batten down the hatches and go full speed ahead, because here are three more. **Fellowship. Discipleship. Stewardship.** Our theological armada, our fleet of faith. *How we connect. How we serve. How we share.* They are interrelated, to be sure. Distinct but never separate.

**Fellowship.** The community, the connected community. We have joined, when we joined this church, a body, not a collection of individuals, but rather a company, a colony, a connected community. To use our image du jour, when we sign up for this cruise, we do so not with the intent of staying in our cabin for the duration. That might have its limited appeal – after all, a retreat every so often is what Jesus did. But he always rejoined the community, and God wants us to be with one another so that we can love one another. If religion were meant to be private, we could read a book to experience it, or sit in our living room and watch it on TV, or surf the web. But it is not. The intention of God is that we live connected to one another, so that a deep human need is just that, to be connected.

We are working hard, and working harder, to find and nurture ways to connect. It happens in lots of ways. Formal and informal. Large and small. Through a task – choir rehearsal or a Dining Room Ministry team, or through one of the new groups we are seeking to develop. Fellowship is kind of an old school, church-y word, but it works today because it reminds us that the voyage of faith may never be ventured alone. It is not us at our fullest or best, nor surely not God's vision for us all. Fellowship is.

And **discipleship.** Again, not a word that easily rolls off the Presbyterian tongue. But if we come here to connect, we also come here to find meaning, to explore the purpose of our lives, to deepen our experience of faith and life, to grow, to live beyond ourselves. That means, to again

use our nautical theme, that at times we will be passengers on this cruise, and at times we will be the crew.

At times we will need feeding: through worship and music and prayer, primarily, through education that develops our minds and spirits, through pastoral care when needed in times of crisis or transition. And at times we will do the feeding. Offering care. Teaching. Serving on a committee, of all things. Volunteering in one of our many outreach opportunities. Either way, feeding or being fed, your faith is growing, deep and wide, your discipleship, following the path of Jesus.

I will continue to assert that even when we share our time and talent, we receive more than we could ever give. Ask a Sunday school teacher or a food cupboard volunteer. Ask how they grow in the process of offering themselves. Ask a choir member about a sense of deepened faith even as they commit hour upon hour to learn a difficult piece.

And **stewardship**. Or as we've said this season, **StewardSHIP**. We've turned that word into a kind of theologically sanctioned word for fund-raising, but we know it is so much more than that. Caring for the resources we have been given by God. Faithful responsibility and accountability. For our purpose, stewardship is the resources needed to make this voyage happen. We sometimes talk about this in terms of another set of three: time and talent and treasure. All three are needed to make things happen, giving of ourselves in an integrated, holistic way.

And today, particularly, is treasure day, though treasure might not be precisely the term we would use in this season of financial unrest and market turmoil. A crisis, as it has been described, of Titanic proportions. One needn't be an economist to know that we are somehow at sea. Every organization of which I am a part – seminary, presbytery, denomination, this congregation – has an endowment that has taken a hit, though this congregation's resources are being managed very effectively. The statements we receive in our mailbox at home no doubt parallel yours, and regardless of our station in life, our generational location, we are facing mortgage concerns, college concerns, and retirement concerns.

Some have thoughtfully suggested waiting for Stewardship Sunday. Wait until the first of the year, or, half in jest, until the market has had three good days in a row.

I understand. But I also know that we need to plan. If your circumstances are what they are now, and may change, then by all means, respond accordingly this morning. Remember that we are a community and that we are in this together.

Because I also know that we need to make a leap of faith, rather than leaping over the side of the ship. We are facing choppy waters and rough seas. Icebergs. Perhaps even a sea monster or something to that effect.

But let's return to the Bible for a moment. We ate at a seafood restaurant this summer called Captain John's. I kind of liked the sound of it. Think of all those captains. But it breaks down quickly. Captain Kidd. Captain Bligh. Captain Queeg. Captain Stubing. Even Captain Crunch.

If the metaphor of who is passenger and crew is nuanced and complex, the issue of who the captain is is not. Just as Jesus is the anchor, Jesus is the captain. And because of that, there will

be no panic, no despair, and certainly no fear. There may be course correction and the crew might need whipped into shape a bit – that’s the nature of fellowship and discipleship.

But Jesus is calm and purposed and full of hope, and this voyage will only be a faithful one if we allow that hope to reflect on us, in us, through us.

The leap of faith we make is getting on the ship in the first place, and trusting the captain to lead us through troubled waters, through peril. In the face of every fear and every anxiety, including how we will support this voyage.

So rather than panic, I will assert that there is no better time than right now, no better bet to place than on the church, no better investment to make than to support what happens in this place, to connect stewardship with fellowship and discipleship. We have made the case, and on top of that, we are seeking to be frugal with every penny while at the same time moving ahead with the kind of programming and commitments that will make this trip a meaningful one, for you, for our community.

I can’t, we can’t, say what number to put on that card, your particular situation. Prayerful consideration is all that we can ask, and a response based on the ways that the Spirit of Third Church is traveling through your spirit.

- What I hope, is that the image of the ship will intrigue you and pique your imagination.
- What I hope, is that the voyage we have been called on with our fellow travelers – passengers and crew and all the saints that have gone before us – will have meaning, will deepen fellowship and discipleship, the ties that bind us to one another and the call to live lives of meaning and purpose.
- What I hope, is that like all good things, this conversation is about the journey as much as it is about the destination, though the destination, I admit, is pretty good.
- And what I hope, is that we, like the disciples, will be amazed by it all.

To the glory of God, and Christ Jesus, our guide and guardian, captain and anchor, brother and friend. Amen.