

HOW FAR WILL THEY GO?

Together Series (Part 2) | Text: Mark 2:13-17; John 6:1-15

I imagine you've noticed that we are in the midst of a somewhat lively political season these days. As I've followed the campaign of Joe Biden, Donald Trump, Nikki Haley and those around them, I've been struck by an element that unites them all. Everyone seems profoundly conscious of all that's going to Hades... of all that's being done wrong... of all the missing pieces and messed up situations in our world... and of all the woeful lacks in the people leading us or vying to lead us.

In times like this, I always think it's helpful to remember that we are not the first generation to face times of trouble and turbulence. There have been people who faced worse and whose response to their times was an exercise of character and commitment that made all the difference in the end. I think that's one of the reasons why I've appreciated the story that gets told in the book and movie drama, *THE BOYS IN THE BOAT*. Maybe some of you are familiar with it.

The story begins in 1933, amidst the trouble and turbulence of the Great Depression. One-quarter of all Americans were out of work. Two million people were homeless. Large swathes of the American populace worried daily about where their next meal would come from. It was a time of scarcity and fear when it would have been easy for people to grow hopeless and selfish and turn upon one another. And in the midst of all that, this little story starts to turn.

Many people couldn't afford food, much less a college education, but the University of Washington was offering their struggling students part-time campus jobs if they made the school's rowing team. And so on Monday October 9, 1933, 175 would-be rowers showed up to try out for the freshman crew team. They were a motley crew – tall, thin, short and stout. They came from cities and small towns and farms. Some of them were relatively affluent, a lot were very poor. Most of them had never been in a rowing shell – the term used for the long, thin-hulled boats that characterize the sport of rowing. But what united this great crowd was a sliver of hope that there was something for them here – something that might help them fill their stomachs and maybe their souls in a time of need. And for this, they were willing to undergo the testing that might reshape their future.

The Bible describes a moment like this in John chapter 6 at verse 1. We're told that **Jesus crossed** – presumably in a boat -- **to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias), and a great crowd of people followed him.** Why, we may wonder, are so many people following after Jesus? Why did they, too, get in boats or make the long journey by foot around the coast to keep up with him? The gospel-writer says: **because they saw the signs he had performed by healing the sick.** In other words, because they believed that Jesus had the power to make things better.

Now, let me pause here and make an observation. The crowd that came to Jesus that day were looking for something they didn't have. No one leaves behind their home and their work and follows after some mysterious Teacher if they have it all together. A lot of people (including many of us) come to Jesus because they know they don't have it all together. People who think they have it all together don't tend to be all that interested in Jesus.

Some of the religious people of Christ's time felt that they DID have it all together. In the terms I described in last week's message, they felt their lives were filled with enough **"love and good deeds"** (Heb 10:24-25). Their stomachs and souls were full. They were physically and morally healthy (or so they imagined). And so they were more than slightly appalled by the fact that Jesus – a rabbi – was hanging around (and even eating) with such a motley crew of sinners. But Jesus said, in effect, that he'd come for people who knew they were sick... who knew they didn't have it all together.

You know what I love about this church? It doesn't have many Pharisees. It has a lot more people like the colorful crew who showed up at that boathouse at the University of Washington in 1933. Now, it's important to note that many of us have more things going for us than those people living through the Great Depression. By virtue of living in America, in this era of healthcare, in this period of technology, at a time when – despite all that still needs fixing – so many things DO work, we are among the blessed. But like those who came to the boathouse or those who came to rendezvous with Jesus' boat -- some of us know that we don't have it all together.

Some of us would like to have a clearer sense of our identity, belonging or purpose as we move through our school days. Some of us would like to experience a deeper level of friendship than we currently have. Some of us would like to develop the wisdom or character to make our marriage or our parenting better than it is right now. Some of us would like to find a peace that makes us less anxious... or a power that breaks us free of our addiction... or the promise that our past failures don't define us... or a pathway to doing something truly life-changing with all our success. In other words, some of us know we are sinners and that Christ is a savior and so we come.

I've always been fascinated by what happens next in the story we read in John's gospel chapter 6. Jesus has crossed the Sea of Galilee to the far shore. Presumably, he gets out of his boat at the dock and sees the crowd of people who've come looking for what he might do for them. And we read this. **Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples. The Jewish Passover Festival was near.** Keep that detail in mind because we'll return to it. **When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, "Where shall WE buy bread for these people to eat?"** Now, I love this question because, dollars-to-donuts, Philip and Jesus' other disciples are aware that there is a burgeoning problem here. A lot more people have shown up at the boathouse for freshman crew practice than expected and it's obvious to the disciples that there's no way they can accommodate all these people. Jesus sees Philip turning

toward him with this look of anxiety in his eyes, as if to say: "Jesus, what are you going to do about this?!" And Jesus replies: "How are WE going to address the need?"

The next verse tells us that **Jesus asked this only to TEST him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do.** Some people read that as if Jesus were saying: "Ah, Philip, I was just kidding. You just sit back. I've got this." The empty stomachs... the stuck spiritual life... the broken marriage... the shaky parenting... the addiction... all that other stuff that people come to me for... I've got it covered. You don't need to do anything. I'm just going to snap my fingers and fix it. That's NOT what Jesus was doing here. The TEST, Philip, isn't to find out if you trust ME to address this issue; it is to see whether you are ready to join ME in a solution.

Philip's response here is illuminating. It reveals what I would call the SCARCITY Mindset. **Philip answered him, "It would take more than half a year's wages to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!"** I mean, Jesus, there's not even close to enough money to solve the problem. Even if we had the cash, there's not a store anywhere near where we could buy what we'd need to even make a start on this issue. There's always a lot of reasons why something good can't be done and plenty of people to point that out, as the next verse makes clear: **Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up, "Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?"**

Can you hear the dejection in Andrew's question? When you live with a sense of scarcity it leads to such sadness. Maybe some of YOU are living with some sadness now as you contemplate the gap between things as they are and things as you'd like them to be. You think: I don't have enough energy... I don't have enough time... I don't have enough wisdom... I don't have enough talent... I don't have enough confidence... I don't have enough partners... to fill that gap, to turn things around, to reach that goal.

Fair enough. From your present vantage point, that may be realistic. But don't let your humility overcome your availability. Don't let your awareness of what you don't have stop you from using what you do have. You see, there's another mindset we can choose to adopt when we are facing trouble, turbulence or adversity of any kind. We can choose to be like the unnamed boy in this story. Have you ever thought about that kid? How is it that Andrew even knew that amidst this big hungry crowd there was a boy who had five little bread rolls and a couple of sardines? I'll go with Occam's Razor: The principle that the simplest explanation is probably the truth.

I think the boy volunteered himself. I think he saw the disciples looking desperate and talking among themselves over the food situation. Kids do notice when adults are under stress. So he pulled out the lunch he'd been carrying in his cloak pocket and said: "Here, let Jesus use these." This is what I have, so this is what He'll use. I think this is the shift God wants us to make in a lot of the troubled situations we face. Jesus calls us to move from a mindset of scarcity and sadness to a mindset of sufficiency and surrender. When our eyes are focused on Jesus, we worry a lot less about what we

don't have and trust a lot more in what he can do with what He can do with what we put in His hands.

I think most of us know what happens next. It's one of the most famous stories of the New Testament. Jesus has everybody sit down on the grass. The Bible says there were about **five thousand men** there, which means that the crowd was a lot bigger than that because there was obviously this boy and likely lots of other children and women there. **Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish. When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, "Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted." So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.**

The miracle of the loaves and fishes has fascinated readers and analysts for centuries. Did Jesus supernaturally multiply what was put in his hands? Did the crowd see the example of the boy who gave up his lunch for others and then reach into their cloaks and take out the food they'd been hiding? That little throwaway comment we read earlier in verse 4 that **the Passover Festival was near** is intriguing because we know that when pilgrims headed to Jerusalem for the Passover they packed food with them. There were no Wendy's or Chipotles en route! But, either way – whether it was the miracle of God's generosity or the miracle of human beings inspired to be more generous than before – this story boils down to the word SURRENDER and what God does with that.

One year ago, some of you dared to move past a scarcity mindset toward a sufficiency mindset. You stopped focusing so much on what you did not have and thought hard about what you did and do have and you made the bold decision to take it out of your cloak and put it into the hands of Jesus. You trusted that you would be provided for, even as you were generous toward others. Look what God has done with that. A new preschool being born. A disability ministry launched. Thousands of individuals and families lifted. I bet you aren't sad when you consider all this. I bet you are glad you surrendered.

As I bring us to a close today, let me take you back to the story from 1933 with which I began today. Both Tracey Bianchi (who's also preaching today) and I have a particular resonance with the story of the BOYS IN THE BOAT because each of us spent a lot of time in a boat, rowing on the crew team of our respective universities. The story in that book and movie is the story of what can happen when very ordinary people surrender themselves to an extraordinary purpose. The disciple Andrew's question to Jesus: **"How far will they go?"** might well have been asked of that ragtag group who showed up on the dock in Washington on that October morning. The answer is: All the way to the Berlin Olympics in 1936 and a gold medal victory for the power of freedom and faith in the face of Adolf Hitler's regime.

As Tracey and I can tell you, rowing is the second-most powerful experience of a whole group being TOGETHER that either of us have ever known. There comes a moment in the boathouse when a team lines up on either side of the shell and the coxswain (the boat's driver) issues a command: **"Hands on!"** and all the rowers put their hands on the gunwhales of the 60-foot boat. Then the coxswain says: **"All together now, LIFT!"** as we raise the boat from its storage place, walk it out of the boathouse, and set it into the water. And then there comes this other moment that neither of us will ever forget. I've spoken of it once before.

When you're out on the water in the midst of a great race, you start to forget all thoughts that you don't have enough or haven't brought enough to serve the mission that has brought you there. You begin to feel the sufficiency of your training and a surrender to the goodness of the sublime thing that is happening in the boat. With each sweep of the long oars and each explosion of thrust from your legs that drives the blades through the water, the team becomes more as ONE. Every heart and head and hand moves TOGETHER until the synchronization of purpose becomes so perfect that this huge craft literally LIFTS up in the water and flies forward at a speed that is almost rapturous.

That's what THE BOYS IN THE BOAT experienced. That's something of what the first disciples experienced. That's what Jesus invites you and me to experience with one another and Him as we bring the sufficiency of what we have and surrender it to his good purposes. If you want to experience a real LIFT in your lives, LIFT others with your generosity. Make the choice to open your cloak, to get into the boat, to be part of the massive movement of grace that has been sweeping through this crowd of more than 5,000 over the past year. Help us cross the finish line with more resources for feeding others than we can even contain in twelve baskets.

In the name of Jesus, I bid you: **"Hands on!"** and **"All together now, LIFT!"**

Please pray with me...

Lord, I can imagine Philip and Andrew in heaven now looking upon this Church, seeing your power at work in our hearts, and smiling as they say: "How FAR will they GO?" Let it be far and fast and for your glory and the blessing of people. In Jesus name, we pray. Amen.