

Sunday, August 21, 2016 - Getting in a Boat

John 21:1-13

Marysville United Methodist Church

Pastor Jenny Smith

On Tuesday, I found myself feeling sad about some recent deaths in our community and my soul needed a walk in the woods. I headed over to Twin Lakes and walked among the trees for a bit. Then I heard a guy yelling at his dog who had jumped into the lake to chase geese. The guy sounded more and more desperate as the minutes ticked by and the dog showed no sign of turning around. Just kept swimming and chasing geese, who were smart enough to flutter about every time the dog got remotely close.

I watched this unfold from another part of the lake. I watched as the guy got one of his friends to wade into the water with him. They found a huge log and started hanging on it and pushing it out towards the dog. I'm not quite sure what their plan was but they had to do something. I heard them tell some others, "It's a puppy! It won't be able to swim very long before he might drown!" I saw them run to the second lake and ask a guy with a small boat if he could help them for a minute. The guy with the boat paddled over with his young daughter who had been fishing. They all picked up the boat and ran it over to the first lake. At this point, 6-7 people were invested in getting this dog safely out of the lake. The guy in the boat jumped in and started paddling towards the dog. We all watched as he pulled up next to the dog and struggled to pull him into the boat. He finally got him in without tipping the boat himself and paddled back to shore. There were smiles and thank you's exchanged between strangers.

When we move through life alone, without asking for help or reaching out, it might feel safe, but it's lonely. We get isolated. And we miss out on what God can do in and through us when we're willing to open up our lives to other people.

We're designed to move through life together.

- When the disciples' lives was put in a blender and nothing looked the same anymore, they went fishing *together*. The strength we draw from each other is powerful.
- Jesus simply said, "Try it this way." And they tried it, **together**.
- As good western Americans, we often see our personal transformation as....personal. Individualistic. Our own journey. **But we cannot follow Jesus by ourselves.** I would argue we can worship God by ourselves. But we cannot love other people...by ourselves. Believe me, I've tried.
- Jesus invited them to try something new and they didn't each set out on their own strength to "figure it out." They stayed in the boat together and tried the new thing as a group. That's when they received more than they could ever imagine.
- There are seasons where it's time to get in a boat. We're willing to show up and be seen by a group of people. We're willing to share part of our story with people we're learning to trust.

On Wednesday night, over 100 of us gathered at Kayak Point to celebrate summer and our coming adventures as disciples this fall. We celebrated new steps of faith these seven individuals took. God is doing a new thing in their heart and baptism is one way to express that. These individuals are literally and spiritually wading into a new season of following Jesus. Can they do this work by themselves? No, we promised on Wednesday to journey with them. To pray for them, to encourage them. To join them in a small group to study and grow together.

It's among abundance and community that Christ is seen.

- For the disciples in the boat together, there was scarcity when they did it on their own and abundance when they trusted God together as a group -- that's been my experience in life.

There are times, I've committed to a group for a three month span and I'm excited at the beginning. But then kids get sick, I'm tired, it was a hard day at work and the thought of staying home and skipping my group gathering that night sounds really good. But I drag myself there, sit on the couch and over the next hour and a half, my heart warms, the pace in my soul slows, and I'm reminded...we really are in this journey together. And somehow, I need these people.

So it doesn't really matter what kind of group (or boat) we're in, it just needs to be a group where we get a chance to share how life is really going, we pray for each other and we're learning something new from Jesus together.

It can happen:

- While we're folding clothes for Kloz 4 Kidz
- when we're getting food ready for Community Lunch
- when we're reading the Bible together
- when we're watching a DVD from an author
- Or rocking in chairs while our kids play
- Or singing on a music team
- Or raising our hand and voicing a question or doubt we've always struggled with

When we choose to get in a boat with people we're learning to trust, God meets us with abundance. More than we can ever imagine.

Examples of Fall Groups

- Open up book in their bulletin and go through it together – also can visit www.marysvilleumc.org/adults.
- Sign up insert in bulletin -- or sign up online
- Maybe you look at this list and don't really see anything that fits where you're at. Build a new boat! The thing that you love and connects you to God and others, is likely a thing that someone else would love to do too.
- I saw a group once that met to cut coupons and talk about life together. They ended up buying tens of thousands of dollars of groceries for a local food bank. Or one group of 4 guys in their 30s and 40s met twice a month at a restaurant for wings and shared what was going on in their lives. It wasn't a big "spiritual" thing. At the end they asked how they could pray for each other. But after a year, do you think they had grown in their faith? Certainly. If you want to start a new kind of group, let's talk!

I want to tell you one specific reason why boats (or groups) are so important in the life of a church. As a faith community grows, one person at a time, the dynamic changes. When a church has 50 people, they all can know each other. It feels comfortable and cozy. When a church has 5000 people, it's a different dynamic. They can learn from teaching pastors, but they will never ever know everyone in their church. We have about 350 people connected to this faith community. Should we know everyone here? It's tricky. Sometimes we want to. We like being part of a smaller church where we can know everyone's names and feel connected.

The problem is most people are only capable of knowing the names of 100 people at one time. And here's the thing. As your pastor, I would much rather you know the joys and challenges of 10 people than just the names of 100. I would rather you drop off food to someone after surgery, send an encouraging text to a friend having a rough day and to hold the hand of someone going through a divorce than to simply smile and wave to 100 people.

Sometimes I avoid being in a small group because it takes more work to walk through life with 10 friends in a real way than to have easy, light conversations with lots of people on a Sunday morning.

But the true transformation and growth happens when we get honest with a small group of people who truly love us. We care for each other when life is hard, we celebrate when it's full of joy. These are our disciples and friends. We're in the boat together.

Personal Stories

We had groups of people who met here on Monday nights last spring to practice this kind of thing. I asked them to share what they learned...

What I have learned most from being in a small group is how each person lives their faith or walks their Christian life. From one couple taking someone into their home for an entire year because that person was going to be on the street. The generosity of another couple when their friends water pump went out and they paid to have it fixed. NO thought of being paid back, they just did it. The love another couple have shown to their large family by having weekly family dinner night and we're talking about more than 20 people sometimes. The grace and courage that another one has shown through loss of her spouse.

I've always felt intimidated by the Bible. I never picked up to actually read it. I learned to take it one small step at a time and that I'll learn more in a group. My faith has always been "child like". I've learned that a more fact based, intellectual faith is a good thing. My faith is growing...plain & simple.

Open discussion, scripture based, meeting & learning about everyone, casualness, praying outside, laughing. I appreciated that while we were supporting each other, we were looking inward as well.

We get to know people better than on a Sunday morning.

Seeing and hearing a perspective of others; knowing we are searching, trying, learning and asking together.

My faith has always been there but with this group it has become more vocal and I am able to share.

It forced me to slow down and take a few hours out of the chaos to have some adult conversation and spiritual focus.

I learned to even further distance myself from any preconceived ideas as building the relationship with others really freed me to be willing to trust those I may have previously assumed would not accept me.

As your pastor, one of my jobs is to create environments where we can connect to God and to each other. Getting into a boat this fall is just about the best way I can imagine to do that very thing. It's normal to be nervous. Wading into a new thing is never easy. But our God meets us in the boat. And invites us into abundance. God prepares us to receive more grace, joy, love, peace, healing and new life than we thought possible. Life is good when we're in the boat together, my friends. Amen.