

Let's Put Down the Oars and Go With the Wind

Sermon September 1, 2024

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Scripture:

- Zechariah 4:6
- Romans 8:26-39

Opening Prayer: Holy Spirit, You are welcome here. Come flood this place and fill the atmosphere. Your glory, God, is what our hearts long for. To be overcome by Your presence, Lord. Speak to us this morning, God. Holy Spirit, move in our hearts as we seek to be your faithful church gathered here in worship. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.

It is Labor Day weekend, the unofficial end of summer. But this morning, let's hold onto summer a bit longer and go on an imaginary journey together. Let's imagine we hop on a nice coach bus together and drive to a large and beautiful lake. When we arrive, the water is beautiful. There are groups who are rowing in their rowboats and skulls, and others who are gliding along in colorful sailboats. We watch for a while. Some in their rowboats and sailboats are clearly having a great time. In other cases we see rowers struggling and sailors working hard to maneuver their sails. We decide we want to go out on the water, too. Should we choose the rowboat or the sailboat?

What powers the rowboat?

What powers the sailboat?

Which of these will require the most work?

Of course, it is the rowboat. We provide the power. The advantage of the rowboat is that we will have a bit more control over our journey. The harder we row, the faster and further we will go. After a while we will get tired with all that rowing. In a sailboat, we are dependent on the wind for our power and we have less control. However, if we are able to catch the wind, we will be able to go further and faster than we would in our rowboat.

In her book, *The Sailboat Church*, Joan Gray, a former moderator of the General Assembly of the PC(USA), uses the metaphors of rowboat and sailboat to talk about individual congregations. The PNC has been reading and using this book for our devotions as we have begun our work and I have found it to be a book with a very powerful and meaningful message. This morning, I'm going to draw from her work to get us thinking about our church, Media Presbyterian Church, and our mission and vision for ministry.

Gray writes in her book: "The essential difference between rowboat and Sailboat churches may not be apparent on the surface. Both kinds of churches may be active and growing in numbers. Both may struggle and even die.

Whether a church is liberal, conservative, or middle-of-the-road is no indication of whether it is a Sailboat or a rowboat. They both exist in urban, suburban, and rural areas. The difference is in the attitude of the members and leaders.”

So what is a rowboat church? A rowboat church is one that, while giving a nod to the Lordship of Christ, really relies on themselves to power their ministry.

- They do what they can with what they’ve got. And sometimes they get tired of rowing; they burn out.
- They know God has given them a purpose, but the attitude is either “We can do this!” or “We can’t do this.” Notice the pronoun and who is in charge.
- It’s all about how hard, long, and well the people of the church are willing to row the boat that is the congregation.

What are the signs of a rowboat church?

- A focus on circumstances and resources, whether abundant or lacking.
- A focus on “fixing” problems.
- A focus on finding the right person to fix our problems for us - a leader; An attitude that getting the right pastor will solve all our problems
- Blaming others and circumstances for our problems. “If only so-and-so or such-and-such were different, we could grow.”

These all share the idea that we humans can make the ultimate difference. Yet this is quite close to the heresy that we can be saved through our works.

A Sailboat church, on the other hand, is one that embraces an intimate partnership with God, and puts their trust in God to provide and do what only God can do. Gray writes that, "Only congregations that are living into a transforming relationship with ...God for whom nothing is impossible can hope to fulfill their potential as the body of Christ." God and we as believers are partners in the church.

So in a rowboat church, the people of the congregation are trying to power through and row the church where they think it should go. In a Sailboat church it is all about capturing the wind and moving where that wind leads. The Hebrew word *ruach* is translated into English as breath, wind, or spirit. The wind in the sails of a Sailboat church is the Holy Spirit. Gray reminds us that the Holy Spirit is as much a living, personal being as are Jesus and God the Father. She writes, "God's power changes things we cannot change and provides resources beyond what we have ourselves to do God's work. The Spirit can draw us together when, left to our own devices, we will remain divided. When every path seems blocked, the Spirit can show us God's way forward. The Spirit opens doors that to human strength remain stubbornly closed. Minds are changed and hard hearts softened not by our human arguments but by the power of the Holy Spirit." It is the Holy Spirit that powers and empowers the Sailboat church.

What is the Sailboat's mission or where should we be focused in our journey?

As a Sailboat congregation, we need to:

- Proclaim the Gospel: That is the number 1 priority
 - Other organizations do good things that resemble other aspects of what we do as a church.
 - Proclaiming God's saving love and power to the world is uniquely the mission of each church.
- We need to be a place to experience God.
- We need to be a place that invites others to join us in our journey.
- We need to be a place that lives out our faith in service.
- We need to be a prophetic witness of God's saving love and grace in this broken world.

Sailboat churches live to partner with the Holy Spirit to do that which God wants us to do in this world. It is important for us to discern how God wants to partner with us and then work *with* God to carry out that calling.

On our Sailboat, Jesus is our captain.

- We have some first mates, or leaders, including a pastor.
- But if we don't have members who are willing to be sailors and practice learning to sail, we will probably end up rowing.

But what are the qualifications for being a sailor on our Sailboat?

Gray shares, “You don’t sign on to sail in Jesus’ navy to pump up church programs or to increase giving or to recruit more members. Christian sailing is a way of life that involves committed, personal relationship with Jesus Christ. We sail because Jesus calls us to be sailors.”

So the very first requirement of us as sailors is to have a personal commitment to Jesus as our Lord.

- As such, we seek to be disciples who learn from and work to be like our teacher.
- We need to be filled with the Spirit and put on the armor of God.
- This means that we
 - keep Jesus first,
 - are regularly engaged in prayer,
 - are rooted in faith,
 - recognize that God alone is our savior
 - and ground ourselves in Scripture.

We cannot row ourselves into being a Sailboat church.

- Only God can work in and through us to do it.
- It is not about “fixing” the church, but rather letting God be our true north and power source.
- Our mainsail must be prayer.
 - It must be a deep part of all of the crew: leaders and members.

- It is only through prayer that God can supply us with what we need to do the great things we are being called to do.
- However, we often get prayer wrong.
 - In prayer, we are not giving orders to our captain,
 - rather we should be holding out our hands to receive what God wants to do in and through us.
 - In prayer we need to be listening for God's direction for us, both individually and as a church.
 - We need to practice obedience to our captain, Jesus Christ, recognizing that we don't make the wind blow.

As the mission study team met this past year, we earnestly sought to listen to God's voice through our congregational survey and small group gatherings. Our mission statement is an aspirational one; hopefully capturing the essence of the sailing journey we are called to embark upon. Pastor David has been leading the Session in our devotions around our mission and vision and I have been struck by how much deeper these are than I first thought - to me a sign that they were Spirit-inspired. Our mission begins: "To be a welcoming Christian fellowship of all ages and walks of life."

- We need to welcome all recruits to experience God and join our sailing crew, recognizing that God has given each of us gifts to contribute to the sail.

- Next we want to be a church that ignites a passion for God through worship.
 - Worship is the place where we are energized for our journey and where we can begin to hear God's voice speaking to us through prayer and God's word.
 - Again, Gray helps us to understand what it means to ignite a passion for God through worship. She writes, "...the weekly gathering of the community for worship in word and sacrament is the most central opportunity for expectant gathering. How sad it is that many people have forgotten to expect anything from going to church on Sunday beyond some social interaction and a little food for thought. Worship, sacraments, and the proclamation of the word of God are meant to change us! God invites us into the fellowship of the covenant community to be transformed and empowered. Do we really expect God to encounter us in worship, and are we prepared to respond by offering ourselves in worship as living sacrifices? This is what worship is really about."
 - In worship we listen for our captain's calling.
 - That's why it is so important that the sailors on our ship are on deck each Sunday expectant of what the captain has in store for them.
- Next our mission says that we are striving to grow as faithful disciples of Christ.

- This means we are training to be good, faithful, and obedient sailors on the ship.
- As we approach the beginning of a new program year in the church, there are many opportunities to learn and grow.
 - We have children, youth and adult Sunday school each week.
 - We have numerous small groups where we can study God's word and learn from each other.
 - If you want to be an active sailor on the ship, I encourage you to take time to study scripture daily and by participating in our many opportunities for learning.

If we worship together and grow together, we will catch the wind in our sails and be equipped to effectively sail where God is directing. Where we sail is our service in the world; how we love each other and those around us.

How do we navigate our Sailboat? Discernment is our navigation system. Gray shares that "Christian discernment is about sorting out God's voice from the others and making decisions based on the desire to be in the flow of God's will. It also involves a commitment to do God's will whatever it may be." The goal of discernment is that in spirit-led obedience, together, we embody the Gospel and become obedient partners in God's work in this world, here in Media and beyond. We need to let go of our desires, at times making sacrifices for what God is calling us to do, and remove what may be blocking us from discerning God's call

to us, which are often rooted in our need to control or our need for comfort.

(Ouch. That hits home for me!)

How do we capture and move with the wind? Gray suggests there are a number of ways that we can set our sails so that we are capturing and moving with the wind:

- As a congregation we need to be living towards being faithful disciples
- We need a spirit-led imagination for where God is calling us, constantly asking, “What will it look like for us to be faithful to God’s call at this particular place and time?”
- We need to focus on obedience to God as the Head of our church and put that above our self-interest
- We need to engage in faithful and faith-filled risk taking
- We need to be engaged in faithful giving
- We need to help each other discover our spiritual gifts and, as a church, focus on ministries for which our members are gifted.
 - God will bring into our midst those equipped to serve for our call
 - Each and every member has a role to play on the Sailboat
 - Discerning what those gifts are and what that means for our journey together is key to hearing God’s call to us
 - Each member of the crew has a role to play

- We need to rely on God's love to have supernatural love for one another, for each member of the ship's crew and for those we serve on our sailing journey.

- We need to see hard times as times to grow.

Media Presbyterian Church's new vision is *also* aspirational;

- it lays out in broad brushstrokes the journey we believe God is calling us to take.
- But we need to discern what this means in our lives together; in the programs of our church.
- It calls us to use our spirit-led imagination to "fill-in-the blanks" as to how we live it out.
- To be successful, we will need to take some faith-filled risks and be willing to do things in new ways and undertake new adventures.
- Most importantly, and something that came out in our small group discussions, is that we want to help each other to discern our individual spiritual gifts, so that each of us can contribute to the sailing journey.

So what does our vision say?

- First, we say that our church will be a spirit-filled community that invites God to work powerfully among us as we worship, grow, and serve together.
 - This means we want to be a Sailboat church,

- not rowing of our own power, but together capturing the wind in our sails as we live out our Christian life together.
- And we want to invite others to join us as we sail, saying that we want to be a sanctuary of grace, welcoming all who enter to experience the love of Jesus Christ.
- If we are sailing together, we all have to go in the same direction.
 - Thus we state that we are united in the essentials of our faith.
 - We say that we are committed to growing deeper in relationship with God and one another.
 - We want to learn to be good sailors who work effectively together.
- We are also committed to raising up young sailors, saying that we are especially devoted to nurturing the faith of the next generation, helping them become compassionate disciples who share God's love.
 - (Note that this last phrase has two meanings: they share our love of God and, like we should be doing, share that love with others.)
- Our vision ends by once more stating we want to be a Sailboat church.
 - We say that we want to be “empowered by the Holy Spirit.”
 - We aim to be a radiant light in today's world, sharing the good news of God's mercy and grace in word and deed.”

- We want to be a lighthouse for the Gospel.
 - I have often thought of our steeple, which can be seen from all over Media, as a lighthouse.
 - Recently, though, I have also seen it as the mast of our sailing ship.

Our vision lays out broad brushstrokes for our journey.

- We value and want others to join us as we worship, growing as disciples of Christ, serving together through local and more widespread mission, and nurturing our children and youth to grow and worship together with us.
- We want to be a welcoming and bonded fellowship of believers.
- But how do we do that?
 - That's still for us to listen for God's voice; the Spirit's leading;
 - to answer the question, "What will it look like for us to be faithful to God's call at this particular place and time?"
 - What are our members' gifts?
 - Are we willing to be faith-filled risk takers?
 - Are we willing to be faithful givers of our time, money and other resources?
 - Are we willing to put God and His church above our own individual desires?
 - Are we united in our love for each other and obedience to God?

As I was picturing rowing, I found myself picturing competitive rowing; in a regatta.

- It is interesting that the rowers are facing backwards; looking at where they have been.
- Yet in a sailboat, we are free to look forward.
- Not at what has been,
 - even if what has been has been great things of God,
 - but rather looking forward to where God is calling us to go and do next.

Even when we are being obedient and faithful sailors, sailing into our mission and vision, we may encounter times when we seem to be without wind.

- These may be times when God is most trying to speak to us.
- We need to wait patiently, be alert for God's voice, and test what we are hearing.
- How do we test whether it is the voice of God?
 - Clearly we need to test anything against **Scripture**.
 - As Presbyterians, we have our **confessions**, which reflect the church's understanding of God and God's word throughout time.
 - We can listen to the **counsel of others**.
 - Are we seeing the **fruits of the Spirit**?

- Most importantly, we need to remember that God’s Spirit is the wind in our sails.
 - Even when we may not feel the wind, the Spirit is there. Paul states in Romans 8: “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with groanings too deep for words. And God, who searches hearts, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.”
 - Furthermore, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”
 - There’s the key line we often leave out.
 - God works all things together for good for those who love him and discern His call.
 - God works things out for his faithful, obedient sailors.
 - And if God is for us, then who can be against us?
 - Even when we don’t feel the wind and, even more so, in navigating stormy waters, as a church we can take solace in Paul’s words to us: “No, in all these things we are more than victorious through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present,

nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

- Our captain is the best; He will see us through on our journey.

Gray ends her book with the story of a pastor and church demonstrating what it means to be a Sailboat church. This is the story she shares:

Last summer we were scheduled to go down to work with our sister church in Mexico City. As the trip was coming together, I had a nagging sense that I, or we, were not supposed to go. There were a number of factors involved other than my own unsettled feeling: the sign-ups were lower than usual, people kept saying no, a few even said they did not feel called to go.

I was conflicted about going. On the one hand, I had a feeling something was not right. On the other hand, there would be so many people it would be disappointing if we did not go. Also God had used my experiences in Mexico with our church teams to speak powerful and transformative truths in my life.

In the midst of all this, I got an email from the woman in our church who was going to help lead the trip saying she had filled out the application on the computer but just could not hit send and email it to me. She had been praying and felt as though she was not supposed to go. I was devastated and frustrated. There would be so many people I would be disappointing if we did not go. Soon after this I met with my spiritual director. We discussed the situation. At one point

she asked me, "Have you given yourself permission not to go?" I began to weep! I realized that because of the heavy obligation I felt to go, I had not been open in my spirit to letting the trip drop. This was a powerful and freeing insight for me. I asked our staff and some key leaders to begin to pray about what we should do. One of our staff had an image of an empty field come into her mind while we were praying and asking the Lord for discernment. We were not exactly sure what that meant, but it became an important anchor to our journey.

There were numerous indicators leading us to not go to Mexico, but the confirmation came when I called the pastor of our sister church in Mexico City. I told him we felt the Lord was prompting us to take a year of rest from coming down to be with them this year. I was filled with fear and waited with anxiety and dread for his response. The pastor said, "We will join in prayer, but if God is leading you to not come this year, then we don't want you to disobey his will and come!" Immediately peace began to wash over me.

After we discerned not going to Mexico was God's leading, more and more began to be shown to us. We received guidance to slow down, and focus on the things we were already doing in our own neighborhood. That summer we organized four peace vigils for teenagers shot in our community, and we had many volunteers serve at our church's urban farm. We invested time to develop deeper friendships with our sister African American church. And we did all this out of a place of quietness, rest, and trust instead of constrained and distracted activity.

We could have willfully pushed through our misgivings and gone to Mexico out of a sense of obligation. Instead, the culture in our congregation of slowing down to discern allowed us to keep in step with the Spirit. We stopped to listen, we heard God's direction, and we obeyed.

Our mission tag or summary states: Worship. Grow. Serve. Together.

- Prayer is at the heart of worship and it is in worship that we catch the wind.
- As we grow as disciples of Christ, we learn to sail with the wind.
- As we sail, we serve, within the church, within our community, and beyond as prophetic witnesses.
- And we have to do it together: with each other and in partnership with and obedience to God.
- *We can't do it alone.*

I have long loved the verse from Zachariah, “Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit...”

- It reminds me that I cannot do anything apart from God's Spirit at work in and through me.
- As a church, we can not fix, build, plan, program, or in any way make things happen; not in a way that brings glory to God and not ourselves.

- We have to rely on the Holy Spirit to work in and through us as individuals and a congregation.
- But that doesn't mean we are passive passengers on the Sailboat.
 - We need to commit ourselves to the journey; to our mission.

There's work involved in sailing - just ask Chris Blidan!

Let's commit to worship, grow, and serve, together.

Let's commit ourselves to discerning God's answer to the question: "What will it look like for us to be faithful to God's call at this particular place and time?"

Let's put down our oars and capture the wind.

Let's set sail and see where God will take us together as God's faithful sailors!

Closing Prayer: Holy Spirit, You are welcome here. Come flood this place and fill the atmosphere. Your glory, God, is what our hearts long for. To be overcome by Your presence, Lord. God, we earnestly seek your Spirit to be the wind in our sails. Help us to discern your voice speaking to us and charting the course for our journey as a church. Help us not to rely on our own power, our own rowing, but through worship and growing to be more like Christ, we might serve others in witness to all you have done for us. Help us to remember that while together we can individually do each of these things, you call us to be a united, God-empowered, loving crew of sailors. And most importantly, help us not to fall

into the trap of waiting for a new first-mate, a new pastor, to lead us on our journey, but to recognize that we are seeking to call another member of the crew, to join us in following where You, our captain, lead. Amen.

Charge & Benediction

While the principles of a sailboat church apply to us as a congregation, I think similarly we as individuals need to work at being more reliant on God's Spirit at work in our lives. Yet this is hard. I liken it to relying on the adaptive cruise control in my car. It's fine when things are perking along the highway. But as an obstacle approaches....

- We're slowing, we're slowing, I'm letting go, I'm letting go...
- Hey, God, you wouldn't mind if I take over here, would you?
- Slam brakes. Whew! Woops....

Hey, God, would you take back control? I'll try to do better next time...

Let us pray:

Spirit of the Living God, Fall afresh on this, your church.

Melt us, mold us, Fill us, use us

Fill our sails and empower this, your church, to worship, grow, and serve together.

Holy Spirit, Come rest on us.

You are all we want.

We desire to do all that you would have us to do.

Amen.

And now let us go forth into the world with the wind in our sails, rejoicing in the power of the Spirit!

Thanks be to God! Amen.