

Crossing to the Other Side

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin
Mark 4:35-41 ~ June 20, 2021

Swimming pools! In the 1920's, 30's and 40's, flush with exuberance over the beauty of democracy, America built swimming pools – “resplendent public swimming pools” for entire municipalities and neighborhoods all over the country – where hundreds, even a thousand neighbors could gather. “Said a Pennsylvania county recreation director, ‘Let’s build bigger, better and finer pools. That’s real democracy. Take away the sham and hypocrisy of clothes, don a swimsuit, and we’re all the same.’” Like with free public grade schools, the aim was Americanization; the social melting pot.

‘Twas a grand undertaking until the 1950’s, when, with the rise of racial integration, people realized that public meant public and everybody meant everybody. Town after town, faced with the prospect of integration, instead, drained their pools – literally: then filled them in and paved or seeded them over. The predominantly white municipalities chose to deny themselves this pleasure, rather than share it with those who differed from them. Why would we do that? Why would we think that sharing with you means less for me?

These are questions that Heather McGhee explores in her compelling and beautifully written book, *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together*. The Sum of Us – “s-u-m” – as in zero sum competition, or as in totality. From this swimming pool metaphor, McGhee explores this self-defeating dynamic across the American landscape – public schools and universities, housing, wages, health insurance, and more. At first devastating, *The Sum of Us* is a deeply hopeful book as McGhee then illustrates instances of communities building together.

The passages in the book which will stay with me longest are where McGhee turns subversive, and upends the meaning of a “good education.”

“What if, she asks, we measured the quality of a school by how integrated it was, rather than by its standardized test scores? In one instance after another, she points to how integration confers a host of tangible educational benefits on all students. There is the obvious boost in cultural competency, a natural by-product of working and playing alongside people of diverse backgrounds. But [students’] minds are also improved when it comes to critical thinking. Exposure to multiple viewpoints leads to more flexible and creative thinking, and greater ability to solve problems.”

She doesn’t say it this way, but Heather McGhee has cast a vision of the kingdom of God, the beloved community. She presents this vision coupled with a clear-eyed view of how daunting it will be for us, as a society, to get from here across to the other side.

“Let us go across to the other side,” said Jesus as they got in the boat together.

Last week, Joshua told us Jesus was a criminal. I want you to know that Jesus had a plan. A plan – evident in Mark’s Gospel – to usher in the Kingdom of God as an alternative social economy to that of the principalities and the powers of his day: by moving out through ever-widening circles of relationship: from family, to local village and synagogue, to regions of

difference, and beyond. Today's Gospel makes sense when we see it in this context – as an early step moving from home in Capernaum out beyond.

I find the story itself emotionally confusing. At Jesus' behest, the disciples have set out in a boat to go to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus went to sleep – with a cushion in the stern, even as a great storm rose and threatened their lives. "Do you not care?" they complained, waking him. After stilling the storm, he asks – in a manner that does not feel altogether nice – "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?"

A sense of pathos marks this story. The disciples got into the boat feeling what? Determined? Reluctant? At least, faithful. Then feeling increasingly fearful with rising waves, afraid they could drown; feeling abandoned by their sleeping teacher and Lord; then feeling – I imagine – inadequate in the face of Jesus' response. But given the imminent danger, it would have been foolish for them to be not afraid. I suppose he expected them to trust that with Jesus they were safe... Why am I afraid? Have I no faith? I am drawn to Jesus' naming – and pairing, coupling together – their fear and faith: both.

Louie Crew was the founder of Integrity – a community within the Episcopal Church that advocated passionately and effectively for the full inclusion of lesbian, gay, transgender, queer and all persons in the sacramental life of the church. A beautiful, devilishly smart man, Louie was fond of citing the beatitudes: "blessed are the meek" then said with assurance, "look out, the meek are getting ready."

I think, with Jesus' help and provocation, that's what's happening on this boat: the meek are getting ready. I think Jesus with a plan is preparing the disciples for the hard work of ministry. Bringing about the Kingdom of God – all that work of integration, hard conversations, running smack into vested interests – whatever else it takes, it means living in the company of our own fears, and faith.

This is the first of six stories in which the disciples get into the boat to cross to the other side. In the next story, Jesus will not even be in the boat with them; he will send them on ahead of him. Even though one can see all the way across the Sea of Galilee and make out the distant horizon at the far edge, the communities on the far shores were other, not our people.

Says Biblical scholar Ched Myers, "these harrowing sea stories intend to dramatize the difficulties facing the kingdom community as it tries to overcome the institutionalized social divisions between Jew and gentile. Through this metaphorical action the community of Christ-followers struggles to make the passage to integration. In the ancient Semitic lexicon of Jesus' day, the wind and sea are mythic personification of cosmic forces of chaos and destruction. It is no wonder the disciples are reluctant: all the powers of the symbolic universe of segregation opposes this journey. And no doubt the real-life social hostility to such a project of integration threatened to drown the community. But Mark insists that Jesus will rescue this project and silence the winds of opposition."

Within St. Columba's, and within communities of faith across this land, and in cities and towns; schools, work places, and community centers, the meek are getting ready. Addressing racism, privilege, housing, health care, rights, and access, they're in the boat – we're in the boat – and have pushed off from land, committed to reach the other side. As the waves swell and the winds mount, the systems maintaining the current balance – those aboard abide with fear and

faith, both. Take heart. With courage, it is for us to paddle and sail and love and propel by any means possible; it is for God to bring about that new Jerusalem, the beloved community.

I wonder the ways you are experiencing that coupling of fear and faith, the tension and tug of one against the other. I wonder how this most challenging experience, in all its immediate discomfort, of going up against the systems, may be the very thing you need to be doing for the justice work at hand. I want to reassure you and to bless you in those endeavors where fear and faith meet within you. So, I close with a blessing from William Sloane Coffin ~

May God give you the grace never to sell yourself short;
Grace to risk something big for something good; and
Grace to remember the world is now too dangerous for anything but truth
And too small for anything but love. Amen.