

## **In the Same Boat**

### **Mark 4:35-41**

Right before my daughter Brigitta headed back to college, mid-August, she and I decided that we really needed to have one good outing together before she left, one last mother-daughter bonding experience of some sort. We thought about going into the city and seeing a show, getting a nice meal, but here's the thing - I had a significant birthday this summer, and deep within me -- or maybe not so deep -- was this yearning to prove to my daughter that I was not yet decrepit. And so I said: You know what? Let's go whitewater rafting. Brigitta was a little surprised, since I have never heretofore expressed any interest in -- or knowledge of -- anything relating to water, or what floats on top of it. But I felt I was onto something.

"It'll be great," I said, "you and me, on an adventure we'll never forget." It did, in fact, prove unforgettable. Maybe not for the reasons envisioned. When we arrived at the rafting company, in the northwest mountains of Massachusetts, the first thing that happened was that all the eager rafters-to-be were divided into groups of six. We were placed with Bill and Joe, a father and son-in-law duo, and Sarah and Daniel, a married couple up from Brooklyn.

And then there was Money. I mean, that was his name. The guide who'd been assigned to our particular raft was called Money. I don't know why. I never found out. But I can tell you that no amount of money was enough to compensate Money for the stress we put him through that day. See, the idea is that the guide sits in the back of the boat to steer, and calls out the orders, and the rest of us are meant to move as one well-oiled machine. That .... didn't happen. It was pretty much mayhem in our raft from the start. We were just way too sociable. We'd paddle for a while in unison, but then one of us would start chatting with another, lose the rhythm, tangle up our paddles. and run aground on a rock. This happened repeatedly. While the ten other rafts were bouncing merrily down the stream, we were the ones who managed to get stuck in a willow tree on the shore of the river. In each case, Money would sigh, ask us to please stop paddling, and then singlehandedly maneuver us out. At one point he actually got out of the boat, grabbed the rope and pulled us for a while -- think Humphrey Bogart in the African Queen.

Our chance for redemption still lay ahead, however -- near the end of the trip were the big rapids. Money kept telling us that there'd be a professional photographer on the bank of the river, taking shots of each raft, and we were really going to need to focus, but we could do this. The current picked up, our raft hurtled forward, Money shouted out 'Paddle on the left!' but instead we all freaked out. Money was crazy! We couldn't do this! And in the widespread freakout, Sarah from Brooklyn toppled right out of the raft, followed immediately by Alida from Fairfield. And **that**, of course, is when the photographer took the picture -- capturing the moment when two middle-aged women shot the rapids not in a raft but like a couple of rubber ducks in the duckie derby.

I was aware of a lot of shrieking and hollering going on, it might have been me, and then my own daughter hauled me back into the raft -- thank goodness she'd been lifting this summer -- and Sarah was rescued, too. And Money said, "Paddle right, people" and we did, rather well, actually, finally. And then it was that Bill said, "Well, the good news is ... we're probably all going to be in one of Alida's sermons now."

And so they are. It's good sermon material, actually. 'Cause it isn't much of a stretch to see that what happened to us on that wreck of a raft ride was a whole lot like what the disciples were dealing with on the Sea of Galilee, two thousand years ago, Mark chapter 4. It had been Jesus' idea to get in the boat in the first place. A little bonding experience, maybe -- he had this idea that they could journey across the Galilean Sea together, and go visit the folks on the other side. Maybe **he** knew it was going to turn into a whitewater adventure, but the disciples sure didn't -- they were figuring on a pleasant little sail across the waters, nice views, pretty sunset. And then it got bad. A wind arose, the scripture says, and the waves got really bad, and the folks in the boat were getting soaked, and they were scared, really scared. Freaking out, really. And then they noticed that Jesus seemed to be insanely calm. In fact, appeared to be snoozing while all this was going on. And they go to him and holler "do you even care? do you even care that we're in trouble here?" And it's like he's the guide in the whitewater raft, he's Money -- he's the one who can get things right again -- Jesus calms the waters and then calms his friends, steers them

straight. "Why were you worried?" he says. "Why were you scared? I was right here all along."

It just might be that this story sums up pretty much everything that you need to know about faith, pretty much everything that you need to know about Jesus. It's a story that says no matter how rough it gets, no matter how much we panic, no matter how much we feel tossed and turned, none of us, no one of us is ever alone on the stormy seas. And isn't that the heart of our faith: that there is One who is in the same boat with us, who chose to be in the same boat with us -- not watching from the shoreline, but in the same boat, out in the waves. No matter what we face, this friend is with us; no matter how strong our fear, this Savior is with us, no matter how panicked we get, convinced we are alone, this Jesus is with us. And when we cry out, "hey, do you care?" the answer is always "Yes. Yes. Why are you afraid? I'm here. I got this. I got this." Like my friend Money in the back of the raft, calmly redirecting us, yanking us back in when we flopped out, even pulling the raft through the waters when he had to, well, there's Jesus -- in the back of the boat, in the midst of the storm, saying "I got this." Peace, peace.

About a decade ago, we had a speaker here at the church, at our high school youth group, a woman named Catherine Ho. She was a tiny, charming Chinese woman, my mom's age, and she came to tell her story. Catherine had been baptized as a Christian in China in 1950. In 1955 she was arrested because of her religion, and then arrested again in 1959, and she spent the next twenty years of her life in labor camps and jails, steadfastly refusing to deny her faith. She was worked mercilessly, frequently starved, physically abused. And it was all just for being a Christian, simply believing in Christ. And she had this quiet, sweet little voice, and all the teenagers in the room were utterly silent listening to her, leaning in to hear her. And after a while, she paused to let us ask questions. And one of the teens asked her what maybe we were all thinking - "Did you ever think about just pretending you weren't a Christian anymore?" he asked. "I mean, you could still be one in your heart, but not say it out loud." "Oh, no," said Catherine, "I couldn't ever do that." "Then weren't you afraid all the time?" asked another kid. "Sometimes yes," she said, "but then I would remember. I would remember who was out on the stormy sea with me."

I'll tell you, that's always stuck with me. That little woman, that faith-filled gutsy little Chinese woman, and what she said. "I would remember who was out on the stormy sea with me." That's the power of this bible story. That is the power of this story.

It is a story that has made all the difference in the lives of the faithful for centuries. It is a story that has sustained people in time of trouble, in times of greatest fear. It is a story that says to each follower of Christ, *do not fear -- he is with you --* the boat will not founder, nor the storm last forever. It's the story that sustained Catherine Ho, and sustains every person of faith around this good world living in places of struggle and hurt and oppression. Do not fear, he is with you, he is in the same boat with you.

And if this story has had that kind of power for that many people in *that* kind of struggle, then it's a story that we need to grab hold of too. Sure, what we have to fear or struggle with is not as dramatic as the story I just told you. But our waters do get rough. And our boat tosses and turns. And it makes a whole lot of difference to know that there's someone in the boat with you, someone who's going to say "I got this -- peace." It's different, of course, for each one of us.

What we fear, what we struggle with, what our stormy seas are, that's different for each one of us. And even for each one of us, it changes from year to year of life, from season to season of living. For you right now it might be the struggle of parenting, or the struggle of being a child to a parent. It might be the struggle of sudden change, or the sameness of each day. For one of us, it might be the tossing and turning of a decision that has to be made, for another it might be the choice that's already been made. For one of us the stormy seas might be the future, and for others of us, it's the winds of the past that still seem to billow around us. It's different for each one of us.

But what's ***the same*** for each one of us is who's in the boat with us. What's the same for each one of us is that there's this guy, this friend, this Savior, in the back of the boat saying "Easy. I got this."

What's the same for each one of us is the voice that we hear saying *I am here, I am with you. Do not fear. I am your peace. The boat will not founder, nor the storm last forever. I got this.*

We're about to share Communion, on a day known around this good earth as Worldwide Communion Day. A day in which Christians everywhere are asked to remember that we are all in the same big boat, steered by the same loving guide. In just a moment we will share bread and cup and in that moment remember the one who is present with us always, the one who calmed the seas and calmed our lives, the one who guided the boat and guides us too.

May we feel his presence around this table, within these walls. And may we feel his presence beyond this place, too, in our restless lives that need his peace, in this storm-tossed world that needs his guidance. Amen.