

“Straining at the Oars”
1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:8a
Mark 6:45-52

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July 26, 2009

I have that image of those disciples pulling at the oars—the text says straining at the oars. Initially, when I think about that I think of one man sitting there pulling at the oar. But then I got to thinking about it, I went and looked and found out it was a twenty-six and half foot boat, most likely seven feet wide. They actually found one preserved in the mud that had those dimensions. So it wasn't just one person rowing across the lake. It was a group, probably taking turns at the oars with anywhere from three to six at one time.

So I thought about that image and I thought about how they had to work together. If you have ever worked oars with someone else, you realize it helps if you do it together along with someone probably steering in back. Especially when the wind comes up, when there are turbulent seas, it helps to do it together.

Well as I thought about the disciples going across the Sea of Galilee in that boat, there's a certain way in which it described to me our life. We are in some ways in this life together, moving through it together, and it helps when we row in the same direction, when we work together. We are after all, I believe, in it together.

Well as I look at these disciples rowing across the lake one thing struck me. Where was Jesus? He had sent them on ahead. Often times in our lives it feels that way as well. Jesus has sent us on ahead or given us a direction to go but we don't always find Jesus right there as we are going. It doesn't seem that Jesus didn't know what was going on. It says he looked out across the lake and saw them pulling at the oars as they faced the strong head wind. What does he do? Well he was going to walk on by! It doesn't seem that he felt that straining on the oars was necessarily a bad thing. It was when they got frightened and had that real need for him that he came and got in the boat with them.

I think about what God had done for us in Jesus. God's compassion is looking down upon us, seeing our lives and recognizing that there are times when he needs to get in the boat with us. Isn't that really what Jesus has done? It's God way of coming and getting in the boat with us to move across our lives together with us.

What's interesting to me that when the disciples see Jesus walking on the water, Jesus doesn't say "Okay, get out and let's go." He doesn't expect us to walk on the water. Jesus gets in the boat with the disciples. There are times when we don't quite understand what is going on. We feel the strain of life, our own straining at the oars. We don't quite see what God is doing. But like in the story, I believe that God always sees what is happening. God knows. God is doing things beyond my capability to understand like walking on the water. The divine at work but not expecting me to be that same way. I'm human. And so, he gets in the boat with us.

As I thought about all of that, I recognized that Jesus is sending us. We have work to do. We have a place to go. And it's a wonderful image but we are not literally in the boat, are we? We are not literally straining at oars. So, what are we doing? What is it that God is asking of us? Well I think that's where Paul comes in on this particular Sunday.

Remember he's just talked about how we all have gifts to offer. We all have the energy to get behind an oar you might say, to show the grace of God. But now he says there is still a more excellent way. It's interesting you know that word "way" can also be translated journey—an all surpassing journey that we're called to. It does go on to talk about that. It's not a journey that is just religious. When he starts this chapter, he's really talking in religious language and saying you may be able to speak well, proclaim the gospel, may even have prophecy—be able to speak for God, you may have understanding or knowledge, may be able to have complete trust in God, and may be able to give all your worldly possessions away including yourself. And he's not saying all that is bad. But he's saying it can be empty like a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. He's saying that unless it comes out of love, unless love is central in it, it becomes empty.

I don't think Paul is really saying anything different than Jesus does many times throughout his ministry. He says that the greatest commandment is to love God with heart, soul, strength and mind and to love our neighbors as ourselves. The centrality of love. Remember this is the love of choice, that particular word that is used throughout the New Testament—'agape'—to choose to care for another because they are worthy. We know that all who are children of God are worth caring about. It's that choice.

So what Paul is doing here is beginning to show us how to live that out, our calling in Christ. To live that still more excellent way, that journey. One way I thought about it and perhaps because I had the opportunity to be on a river a little bit this week, I thought about how when you go down a river you can just let go and go wherever you want, wherever the current will

take you. Of course you're liable to end up on the rocks or in an eddy that simply spins you around. God is calling us not to just go with the current but to strain at the oars, to be those who find their way through the current of life, through our lives together in a particular way. He calls that way love. And so he goes on then, here in 1 Corinthians to talk about what that looks like: to be patient, to be kind, not to be arrogant or rude or boastful, not to be irritable or resentful, not to be happy about wrongdoing but about the truth. It looks like to me, and I don't know how else to read it, all of these are about how we relate with each other. What God is asking, calling us to, the still more excellent way that Paul is talking about here, our journey together, our straining at the oars, works out in the way we relate with one another.

And relationships are interesting. We have to work at them, don't we? There are ways in relationships we can struggle. We can have simply differences of opinion. We can become angry. We can push one another's buttons. We can see somebody else make decisions we think are wrong. In all of these, Paul is encouraging us to come in love. So, to face each one of those issues— a difference of opinion, we still come with patience and kindness; somebody pushes my buttons, it's not mine to come with irritable and resentment in the way of love. I don't know about you but I find that pretty difficult. Talk about straining at the oars.

It is still our calling. One interesting thing about this however that as we are called to get in the boat together, as we all strain at the oars together, it makes it so much easier. We go in the same direction. We don't simply spin around in the boat when we are trying together. We think about those things that Paul talks about: to be patient, to be kind, to not be rude or boastful or arrogant. It's a lot easier to do those things— it's a lot easier for me to be patient with someone if they are being patient with me. I feel like that is rowing together. It's a lot easier to be kind to one another if we are being kind back. It's a lot easier not to be rude if they are not being rude. That's the rowing together we do as we are called to be Jesus' disciples, to travel together through life. It helps us get to the other side.

It's like rowing, however, it takes a lot of effort. I found out particularly when going down a river that it helps to know what you are doing. It takes practice. Those oars don't move the way you think they should without a little practice. And isn't that what this is all about? As Jesus sends us on, to work together, to practice it, to be those who take that still more excellent way. That is my prayer; that we can choose to get in that boat together. To strain at those oars together. And together to take that journey, the still more excellent way. Amen.

Prayer

Gracious God, we thank You that You do come among us. Sometimes we wonder at who You are, how You can do the things You can do. Help us recognize that we are not You but You do come to be with us. You get in the boat with us, You send us on. You watch over us and that You've shown us this still more excellent way to work together, to be Your people—a family of faith. Lord, as we gather this morning let us be Your people choosing to live that still more excellent way and, through working together, to show Your grace to the world, to bring healing and hope, to recognize that together that we can bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things and find that love never ends. And so, as we give these gifts, we ask that You bless them and use them indeed on our journey and as we encourage others to know the journey, to know the still more excellent way. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.