

Conversions and Convictions: This Is Who We Are

Be Unafraid - of crossing boundaries for the sake of love and justice

Text: Excerpts from Mark 4,5 and 6

That reading you just heard from the Gospel of Mark may have seemed a little strange to you, maybe even a mistake. Just in case you missed it, here's a summary of what we just read. Jesus gets in a boat with his disciples near the shore of the Sea of Galilee. He teaches people from the boat. He sits in the boat, and he talks from there to the people on the shore. This is not an arrangement that makes for easy communication, so there must be a point to be made here. Then Jesus says to the disciples, let's go across to the other side of the lake. While they're out there a big, scary storm comes up. They get through the storm; Jesus heals a man with a mental illness, and they get in the boat and go across the sea again, to the other side—back to Galilee. Twice more this happens. "Let's go," Jesus says to his disciples; and they row from one side of the lake to the other, so that Jesus can meet and heal people on both shores. All of this happens in the space of just three chapters in Mark's story. What's going on here?

In the two-thousand-plus years that people have been reading and trying to understand the Gospel of Mark, many people—even some scholars—have thought that the repetition of this geographical detail suggested that Mark had never actually been to Galilee, and that he didn't know what he was talking about. Galilee is a good-sized inland sea, seven or eight miles across. It was known for its unpredictable and dangerous storms. It's almost impossible to believe that Jesus—or anyone who knew that region—would have gone back and forth across the water so many times on purpose. Why would he have sent his disciples out there over and over again in a little boat?

In these days there were no engines that could power ships through bad weather or cross-winds. When you went out in a boat, your power was in your oars, your arms. If the wind came up against you, you had to work hard to keep moving forward. If a storm sneaked up on fishermen, they knew they had to wait for it to pass. For most people, the sea was a boundary, an edge to the world they knew and traveled in. A wall of nature, that kept people on the west side separated from people and land on the east. The middle of that sea was a great big hazard. Your life was at risk out there.

This is what big bodies of water signify every time we see them in the Bible: danger, uncertainty, a natural boundary that would keep you in your place unless you dared a crossing. Do you remember the Red Sea, in the story of the Exodus? The Israelites on the run from slavery in Egypt, with armies pursuing them. They got to the edge of the sea and were stopped dead in their tracks until God parted the waters. Waters so dangerous that when the Egyptian army tried to cross, every one of them was killed by the violence of the waves. On one side of that water was slavery; on the other side, freedom. And in between—dangerous, swirling, uncertainty-provoking water.

And Jesus said to his disciples, over and over again, "Go out there. Get in the water. We're going across to the other side."

Today we're talking about the third and last of the three promises that Campbell United Methodist Church makes to the world in our 'brand', the way we talk about this church. In the last couple of weeks we've talked about what it means to *Become* and to *Be Found*. Today: *Be unafraid*. Be unafraid to cross boundaries for the sake of love and justice.

Some years ago, before I came to be your pastor, you said the same thing with different words. You called it “risk-taking mission and service”. Many United Methodist churches used that language. It’s sort of baked into our identity as Methodists to be out in the world doing service, loving God with our hands as well as our hearts and our minds. Taking care of people not only by attending to their spiritual needs, but by addressing physical needs as well: housing, food, relief supplies after a hurricane or earthquake.

It’s the “risk-taking” part that’s a challenge. *Risk-taking* mission and service means stretching beyond your comfort. Serving people who may not appear welcoming, or grateful. It means taking on projects that might not be successful. Offering help to people who aren’t particularly interested in your good intentions. Keeping going even if you’re not sure you’re making a difference.

“Crossing boundaries” adds another dimension to this work.

We say in this church that we will help each other put aside our fear. We say in this church we will *cross boundaries for the sake of love and justice*. That means that we have to be willing to get in the water. It means that when we hear God’s call to us, we will take ourselves out of this sanctuary, do something more than invite people to come in here with us. It means we will follow Jesus into the boat every time he says the place we are needed to enact love and justice is *on the other side* of a big, messy, scary gap. Even if we have never been on the other side before and don’t know exactly what we’ll find over there. Even when we can’t be sure we won’t get hit by a fast-moving storm.

Are we telling the truth? Do we at Campbell United Methodist Church *actually* cross boundaries for the sake of love and justice?

Well, sort of. Sometimes.

Certainly we know what that means. Almost twenty years ago, this church made a bold decision to become ‘reconciling’—to come out publicly as a congregation that was willing to defy the discipline of its denomination and reach out intentionally to offer gay and lesbian and transgender people every benefit of membership in this church. Cross boundaries for the sake of love and justice.

This church’s Art and Spirit Jail Ministry—whose volunteers are in the jail this weekend—have, for the past several years, been going in to Santa Clara County’s jail facilities to bring art and spiritual practices to inmates. Each time these volunteers there, they—mostly middle-aged white women—risk the reaction they might get from inmates who are mostly people of color and poor. People who would probably be pretty uncomfortable in a church like this one. People who no doubt are not often asked to do an art project and talk about how the Spirit of God is moving in their lives. The Art & Spirit volunteers have learned what it means to go through a lock-down at the jail. To empty their pockets and remove their jewelry before they enter. To watch the guard for signs that a storm is gathering. Cross boundaries for the sake of love and justice.

Just today we intentionally disobeyed the tradition of our denomination by admitting to membership in our church people who are Muslim by heritage and identity, people who have not yet decided to trade that identity for the name “Christian”. Not every one of today’s new members has been baptized, as is the usual custom. I made the decision to do this because it seemed to me that it’s the right thing to do—to act to make this church a community where Muslims and Christians can walk side-by-side in the

footsteps of Jesus. Because I think it's what Jesus might have done. I did it because I think it's what you would have wanted your church to do. Cross boundaries for the sake of love and justice.

But there are even bigger challenges ahead of this church, as our life together leads us to the edge of the water. Our neighbors—families who live virtually across the street from this building, whose children we've been reading to at Rosemary School and building bicycles for—those families live in a neighborhood where drugs and crime and graffiti and gang activity live right alongside of them. We've heard mothers in recent community meetings say that they're afraid to walk outside at night, or to let their children outside of their apartments even during the day. The City of San Jose has called this area *Project Hope*; they've installed two full-time staff people for a year, to work at building a better, more cohesive, safer neighborhood.

It turns out that Hamilton Avenue is a pretty solid barrier between that neighborhood and this church. You could drive into the church parking lot for years and never even know there's an area like that nearby. The crime there has never crossed the street in this direction. And if you turn the other way on Winchester Blvd., we're just a few blocks from beautiful downtown Campbell.

Get in the boat, Jesus says. Let's go across to the other side.

Can we set aside our very natural fear enough to cross boundaries for the sake of love and justice?

Some of us—those of us who were born in Sierra Leone or Liberia—go 'home' to Africa regularly. Some of us have never been there. We love our friends who immigrated *from* West Africa; we're glad to send shoes and support the work that allows disabled children to attend school. But will we send a group from this church to Sierra Leone in the next year, as we have talked about? It's far away. It's Africa. Get in the boat, Jesus says. Let's go across to the other side.

The challenge to cross boundaries shows up in our personal lives as well—no doubt more often than we realize. The boundaries of good taste, when we might say something to defend someone who has just been spoken of disrespectfully or gossiped about. The boundaries of our self-consciousness, when what people really need from us is a willingness to share our faith. The boundaries of our comfort, our familiarity, our air-tight beliefs.

At its best, church is a group of people who help one another get over our fear when we are staring out into frightening, swirling waters. A community where we literally *en-courage* one another to do something we might not do on our own. To cross the boundaries that have kept us in our place, separated us from people who need what God has given us to carry. Justice. Love. May God help us, and may we help each other, to be unafraid.