

BOATING (AND OTHER ACTS OF FAITH)

A Homily Delivered on September 11, 2011
First Parish in Needham, Unitarian Universalist
The Rev. John Buehrens, Minister

The winter I was six and a half, my father built me a boat. Not a toy boat; a real sailboat, called a Bluejay – thirteen and half feet long, with a centerboard, mainsail, jib, and spinnaker. My father was a boat designer, among other things, and this was his most popular design ever. By the time I was ten, I was allowed to take a friend with me and captain the sailboat myself. That is, if I could get my mother's permission. And she seemed to think that the only safe time to go sailing was if there was no wind blowing!

But I loved the wind in my face, and the boat tilting as we tacked against the breeze, and setting the big balloon sail, the spinnaker, when running before the wind. It taught me that while we can't control the wind or the currents, we can watch them carefully, and learn how to steer and set our sails to have a great adventure on the water, perhaps win a race, and then, most importantly, to get safely home again.

Boating taught me early in life to accept with serenity the things I cannot change; to learn how to change things that can be changed; and to seek the wisdom to know the difference.

When Gwen and I had children of our own, and so did my younger brother and his wife, Dad found an old Bluejay like the one we'd had as boys. He fixed it up so that we could use it to teach our children how to sail. Perhaps the best family vacations we ever had with our children were the two summers when my brother's family and ours shared a couple of weeks in an old sea captain's house on Cape Cod, on a bluff overlooking the outer part of Wellfleet Harbor. We kept the Bluejay at a mooring off the beach, and got to it in a canoe we'd brought along.

I remember Erica and Mary squealing, when the wind was gusty and we were tacking, "Tip it back, Daddy! Tip it back!" But I also remember them getting impatient when there was no wind at all, and getting out to swim alongside and try to push the boat – until they were stung by jellyfish, and hopped back in.

Wellfleet's own poet, Mary Oliver, has a poem which begins:

You are young. So you know everything. You leap
into the boat and begin rowing. But, listen to me.

Without fanfare, without embarrassment, without
any doubt, I talk directly to your soul. Listen to me.
Lift the oars from the water, let your arms rest, and
your heart, and your heart's little intelligence, and listen to
me. There is life without love. It is not worth a bent
penny, or a scuffed shoe. It is not worth the body of a
dead dog nine days unburied. [So] When you hear, a mile
away and still out of sight, the churn of the water
as it begins to swirl and roil, fretting around the
sharp rocks - when you hear that unmistakable
pounding - when you feel the mist on your mouth
and sense ahead the embattlement, the long falls
plunging and steaming - then row, row for your life
toward it.-- [from *West Wind* (Houghton Mifflin, 1997), p. 46]

Think of boats in New York harbor, and on the Hudson River, that, ten years ago today, when they saw the twin towers hit, on fire and falling, did not head away, but found the courage of love and compassion to head toward scene of the chaos, help put out the fire, to rescue people.

But time is a river, as Heraclites said, that no one can ever step in twice. And this summer, though I visited some pretty wonderful places – from San Francisco to St. Petersburg, Russia – the water I brought here is from our own Charles River, which surrounds Needham on three sides, and where I went canoeing several times, all the way down to the dam in Waltham and back up through Echo Gorge; on a second trip, all the way around through Dedham to where the Charles bends and comes down from Dover and South Natick, and, above there, Medfield.

Paddling along I kept thinking about what the river was like 300 years ago and more – for Native Americans, and the early settlers, before Needham was a town, or this parish gathered. What kind of fish have been lost from our river? birds from its marshes? Plants and animals from its banks? Yet I found myself resolving not to become nostalgic paddling up the stream of time – but rather to become more active than ever on behalf of downstream generations. With this “Green Sanctuary” parish as a real hub of environmental activism in the town and region; with

our UU Service Committee working for environmental justice and the human right to clean water all around the world.

In these stormy times, it seems to me, too many people forget that we are all, on this little blue-green planet we share, in this fragile democracy we call America, “in the same boat,” as it were. People within the boat yearn for us to all row together, row for our lives, and for those of children, and our children’s children. But where and how are we going to now relearn that art, which is, after all, an act of mutual trust and collective faith? Although I would not for a minute suggest that all of us should choose just one model of faithful living, there is an ancient wisdom story about Rabbi Jesus that comes to mind:

That day thousands had come to hear him speak about living with faith. When the crowd grew hungry, his disciples were afraid that they’d never be able to feed them all. Not with just the few fish and a few loaves of bread that they had among themselves. But then, lo and behold, perhaps because the multitude had more for the picnic *hidden* in their robes than they’d been willing to let others see, there turned out to be enough for everyone present – and far more.

That night, Rabbi Jesus stayed behind to pray by himself, quietly alone, while his friends went ahead, across the Sea of Galilee in a boat. Then a huge storm arose, and the disciples, again of little faith, were sure that they would all be drowned. Toward morning, in despair, they thought they saw Jesus come toward them, walking calmly toward them over the waves of water. “Take heart; do not be afraid,” he said. Then the storm was calmed, and they came safely home.

Now that’s the story. So how should we who believe in science and reason and evolution and climate change help the children here today understand such a story. Well, when a UU minister asked Sunday school teachers that question, one good rationalist supposedly replied, “Hm! Maybe we could just tell them that there must have been hidden sand bars!”

But then again, maybe we could all realize that many such stories are not literally true, just eternally true. That long after he’d died those frightened fishermen remembered their Rabbi as someone whose calmness in the midst of life’s storms still sometimes came to them across the waters, restoring an inner serenity that could not be shaken even by the prospect of death itself. Because he had the wisdom to know the difference between the weather we can never fully control or change, and the course that we row, and the inward set of our spiritual sails. So may it be, for us all, in these turbulent times, and always; from generation to generation. Amen.