

“Get Out Of The Boat” – Mark 6:30-34,53-56

Those of you who have been here the last two Sundays, and more importantly those of you who have been paying attention to the readings and the sermons, may note that today marks the third and final look at Chapter 6 of Mark's gospel. Those of you who weren't here or who weren't paying attention need not worry as I'll try to bring you up to speed (and I'm pretty sure I can do that because I was often faking it in class as a student!)

I mention all of this because the structure of Mark's writing is almost as important as the content in recognizing what he was trying to get the reader – that's us – to understand. Mark has a favourite writing technique which is to insert a story within another story, and the whole of Chapter 6 is a prime example of this. The 'outer' story begins in verses 7-13 in which Jesus instructs and sends out the Twelve. The first part of our reading, verses 30-34, tell of their return, their report to Jesus, and his response. In between is the 'inner' story, the account of the imprisonment and death of John the Baptist. As I mentioned last week that account is a really unusual story, especially from Mark, and so looking at the structure helps us to understand that the role of that inner story was to help us know something about Jesus and his disciples. That dark and brooding recounting of John's death is partly an ironic reminder of Jesus' own death to come and a means of highlighting the role of Jesus as the real Messiah.

Why is it important for us to recognize that? It may help to remember that in the opening of the outer story Jesus commissions and sends out his disciples; with the reminder of Jesus' coming death still fresh in our minds we now read of the return of the apostles, who gather around him and tell him what happened. Note carefully – they go out as disciples ('followers') and return as apostles ('those sent'). This is the only place where Mark uses the term apostles, a not-so-subtle hint that after the Good Shepherd (Jesus) has departed his followers will be left to carry on the work of looking after the sheep.

And that shepherding is the main emphasis of the outer story. The first part of our reading not only tells us that the returning disciples/apostles have done very successfully what they were sent out to do (a very rare “atta-boys” from Mark who usually portrays the disciples in a much less favourable light!) but also serves as a transition to the account of the feeding of the five thousand. We also have skipped over the scene of great chaos in the boat as Jesus comes walking across the water and then joins them in the boat and calms the storm.

By skipping over those two major events the lectionary provides us with an interesting and clearer look at Jesus and his disciples. Several fascinating points emerge from that view of their interaction, the first being the need for retreat and recovery. Jesus first takes the just-returned-from-their-mission apostles away to a deserted place to rest for awhile, but that didn't work out so well, as they were swarmed by the crowds and wound up feeding a multitude with two loaves broken as in a Communion Service and also with five fish, seemingly very little but enough to provide twelve baskets full of leftovers. Jesus then sends the exhausted disciples over to the other side of the lake while he retreats and recovers, but even on the other side they could find no relief from the crowds massing and begging for healing.

But there was one other little detail that I noticed in the way the reading from Mark's gospel was arranged, a detail that I thought was not only hugely significant but which also provides us with an insight into the Church's role as an ongoing shepherd to Christ's flock. That detail? Both times Jesus and the disciples got out of the boat. Now that may seem trivial, but stop and think about it for a moment. Both times they approached the shore where crowds were massing to demand from them. Both times they could have used their oars to scoot around the

point to a place where they could escape those crowds, but they didn't – both times they got out of the boat and waded into the crowds to offer comfort, consolation, healing, and help.

And so with that image of getting out of the boat I couldn't help but begin to see various images of churches or congregations as different kinds of boats, and how not getting out of the boat can be and often is one of the major challenges facing the church as a whole today.

Take for example the “cruise liner” congregation: large, fun-filled, tons of entertainment, lots of good food on board, a very professional crew, a dapper and debonair Captain who strokes the passengers and spreads the invitations to those on board to dine at the special table. To be sure, these passengers do go ashore, but mostly for brief expeditions to get a fleeting taste of the ‘local’ life, to seek bargains in the quaint markets, and to hit the scenic highlights. They are usually safely back on board by nightfall to continue to enjoy the good life in each other's company as the ship moves stately on to the next exotic port of call.

Or take for another example the “SeaBus” congregation: routine, a means to get somewhere else, utilitarian, not too demanding, reliable as all-get-out. People keep flocking on board but they can't wait to get out of this kind of boat, more for a means of escaping the crowds than to engage with the crowds in any helpful way.

One can also think of the “rescue boat” congregation: always alert and on standby to roar off to some destination to save one group or another. High-tech gear on hand, an expectant edge to both voice and step, just waiting to launch the boat and go heading out at high speed with lots of noise and big waves, sirens blaring and lights flashing. Spectacular, but once those in peril have been saved, it's back to waiting for the next call to duty.

We all can think of the “tired tub” kind of congregation: anchored in False Creek or some other out-of-the-way place, a once-proud vessel now somewhat shabby and run down although the few left on board still remember it in all the glory it once had. This is the kind of vessel that hasn't reached land in ages, the now aged and tired crew haven't stepped into a crowd since they can't remember when – and more and more they can remember only the long ago.

Oh the images are endless, and not necessarily flattering: the party pontoon boat; the noisemaking ski boats, the sailboats endlessly tacking back and forth but making little progress; the big fancy yacht using resources like crazy but not really going anywhere – I think we could find congregations that matched each one of these images without too much searching.

But what kind of congregation or boat matches the image presented by Jesus and the disciples who got out of the boat to wade into and provide help to the crowds? One thinks perhaps of the hospital ships, those vessels that load up with medicines and medical staff and head off to needy places, tying up for extensive periods of time to offer free medical care to a desperate people. One thinks also of cargo ships that gather together relief supplies – food, tents, water processing facilities, well-drilling equipment – and deliver them to hungry, thirsty, homeless crowds. Even fishing boats provide meaningful analogies of people working together in challenging and even dangerous situations to provide food and sustenance for those back on shore.

The key for me is the way Jesus and the disciples got out of the boat to engage with the crowds, to move among them hearing their pleas for help and responding as they could. This is the empowering message for congregations, to also get out of the boat, to move beyond the walls of the church into the neighbourhood, to meet and serve the crowds where they are. I believe Central is one such congregation, and thanks be to God we are not alone, for there are indeed many other congregations who are not only willing but do indeed practice getting out of the boat to meet with and mingle with and bring to the crowds the good news of healing and reconciliation with God made possible in Christ.