

DISCIPLE-SHIP

(a sermon)

I remember hearing a sermon way back when I worked at church camp in my twenties. The sermon was about discipleship. Preaching to a bunch of restless junior high campers and a bored staff in the Texas Hill Country summer heat, the preacher tried his best to make a point with an illustration I can still recall. He talked about discipleship, using the illustration of a literal ship.

He told us there are so many stories in the Bible involving ships. Noah's ark. Jonah. Jesus telling the disciples to cast their nets on the other side. Jesus calling the disciples to fish for people. Jesus walking on water. Jesus calming the seas.

Discipleship is like a ship, he told us, especially when you think of the crew of a ship. No matter what size ship, you need a crew to make things work. On a commercial vessel, you need an oiler, an electrician, a messman, cook crew members.

Think about how massive the team is on a cruise ship, hundreds of people working together. Or a large sailing vessel, you need someone to open and lift the sails, someone to maintain the rudder, a rower, a deck-swabber and a pilot.

Discipleship is about following. For us, following Christ. But discipleship is not about going alone. It's about following Christ together. We are the crew of this disciple-ship.

We need musicians and teachers, doctors and stay-at-home parents, sales persons and crafts persons. We need all of us with our varied gifts, talents and callings.

Above all, we need the captain of the ship, Jesus, guiding us through both fair weather and stormy seas. In all things, we need God-given trust so that we can say, "Jesus, take the big ship steering wheel" and bring us on home. We need to rely on him and on each other instead of only ourselves.

Did you know that in the Bible the word "you" would usually be better translated as "you all," or as we say around here, "y'all." In our discipleship, it is about community, teamwork, partnership; it is about working together doing God's work, it's about following Christ while lifting each other up and grabbing an oar when our shipmate is tired. May the wind of the spirit guide our sails, my ship mates.

And we are ship mates. We are in this big boat together. We have to row together. Look out for each other. Every one of us pulling our weight.

That is a counter-cultural statement, don't you know? We have been brought up to think that we have to obey the laws of the jungle. Eat or be eaten. We are ruthless in our competitiveness.

Even stomach ulcers are a status symbol. They show just how very hard we work. We work so hard not only to supply the needs of our families, but to outdo each other. We have forgotten that our created nature is partnership; we are made for a complementarity. We have become dehumanized and debased serving only ourselves instead of serving each other.

As Martin Luther King, Jr said, "We must learn to live together as sisters and brothers, or we will perish together as fools."

What will it take for us to awaken to a sense of what it means to be human? To realize just how obscene it is to spend the trillions that we spend on what is now called the department of war, when a very small fraction of that budget would ensure that children would not die daily because they do not have clean water or food.

We are interconnected. There is no way in which one nation can prosper on its own That is not how we were made. As people are interconnected, so are nations.

We are wired for togetherness, being family. This is not pie in the sky sentimentality, this is for real.

You don't have to have religious teaching to understand. You can't survive on your own. If we say we are going to be totally selfish, in next to no time, the person who is totally selfish goes under. We need other people in order to be human.

You can only be a person through other people. An entire generation has been brought up with a selfish mindset. How do we create a new generation with a different kind of mind-set? Who in this society will teach us compassion and basic ethics?

There needs to be a fundamental shift in human consciousness to solve global problems. People are fundamentally compassionate, despite what our politicians want us to think.

Compassion, working together, is the basis of hope, not separatism. We are interdependent.

It takes time. We are learning. We are becoming the people we want to be. But joy must be our approach, even though it can be overwhelming. It does not help if you sacrifice your joy because others are suffering. We people who care must be filled with joy so that others recognize that caring, that

helping, that being generous are not burdens, they are the way to true joy.

Give the world your love, your service, your healing, but most of all, give it your joy. Become an oasis of joy and peace, a pool of serenity that ripples out to all of those around you.

I'm going to preach now. So hear me. What I have to say is not politics, but religion. How religion gets acted out.

The Southern Baptists, a denomination by the way that recently has been exposed for rampant sexual abuse and misconduct by male pastors, this denomination met during the summer and made a proclamation at their convention, passing a vote by a large majority, that women are not allowed to preach or serve as pastors or in leadership positions in their congregations.

Women are not allowed to serve in any pastoral role or function in the Southern Baptist Church. The gifts of women in ministry are not recognized, not allowed, not validated, not appreciated in the largest non-Roman Catholic denomination in our country. And don't get me going about the Roman church's stance toward women in ministry.

The military, our military in this free country of the United States of

America, has been removing women and people of color from positions of leadership and power and making their ascension in the ranks virtually impossible.

There are leaders in our government promoting a Christian nationalist agenda who believe that women should not be allowed to hold jobs outside the home at all. In the year 2026, this is happening.

History has its eyes on us, disciples of Jesus. On us. And certainly women, all women including queer, trans, gay and bi women, who are hearing that they should be silent, that their voices and gifts are not useful for society or the church, all women certainly have their eyes on us and how we speak into this moment?

We need to amplify our message of welcome, our message of complete and inherent dignity of each person regardless of skin color, regardless of gender identity, regardless of sexual orientation, regardless of socio-economic status, because when hate is loud, love has to be louder.

What inheritance are we leaving for the next generations?

The ship of disciple-ship is a big, broad, wide boat. There's lots of room. Reach out and grab the hand of that

person treading water who is about to drown. Reach out and pull them into the ship. Pull them in just as someone once pulled you in.

Love God, love others, serve. That means all. This boat is big.