

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, 6-20-2021

It had been a long day for Jesus. He had spent the whole day teaching, surrounded by crowds pressing in on him from every side. The crowds were so bad that he had to get into a boat and teach from the water. At the end of the day, he was exhausted. He needed to get away from the crowds for at least a little while.

"Let's go to the other side," he said to his disciples, and they took him in the boat -- I love that line -- "just as he was." He was so tired that he promptly fell asleep and managed to sleep right through a huge storm, which is quite an accomplishment in a small boat with big waves.

Some years ago, when we were on sabbatical, Brian and I visited the Sea of Galilee, and it was fascinating to me. We happened to be there on a day when it went from dead calm to big waves. I was really surprised at how quickly it could go from looking so still to something really frightening. The lake is not really that big. You can see all the way across it. But with waves, you could see how it could be truly threatening.

Many of Jesus' disciples were fishermen, and I'm sure the ones in charge of the boat on this occasion were used to going back and forth across this lake. It was their life's work to be on that lake. They were very familiar with it. And I'm sure that they thought they had everything under control. Until they didn't. When a fierce wind started blowing and the waves got high, they didn't think to consult Jesus at first. They waited until the situation was completely out of hand. And when they finally did ask Jesus, it wasn't exactly a request for help, was it? It was more like a complaint, an accusation. "Jesus! Teacher, don't you care that we are perishing?"

I don't know if any of you are familiar with Paul Simon's song *Some Folks Lives*. I'm a big Paul Simon fan myself. *Some folks' lives roll easy as a breeze, drifting through a summer night, heading for a sunny day. But most folks' lives, oh they stumble, Lord, they fall. Here I am, Lord, I'm knocking at your place of business. I know I ain't got no business here. But you said if I ever got so low, I was busted, you could be trusted.*

The disciples were so low, they were busted, right? And they finally got to the point of knocking on Jesus' place of business, and discovering that he could indeed be trusted.

Have you ever thought about the shape of most churches? I should ask, do you know what, in Episcopal and Roman Catholic parlance, we call this part of the church? It's the nave. Look at the shape of the church. Traditional churches are made to look like upside down boats.

The Nave, think Navy, of the church is the boat. And that symbolism is intentional and related to this story and to the idea of Noah's ark. The Church is God's people in the boat carried on the stormy sea and with God as company; with Jesus in the boat, with us, our protection in this storm. But what does Jesus' presence in the boat mean for us?

I've been thinking this week about the life of Louie Crew Clay. I don't know if you folks know who Louie Crew Clay was. He is most well-known to Episcopalians as Louie Crew. He became Louie Crew Clay later in his life. He was born in Alabama, earned a Ph.D. in literature and became a literature professor. Way back in 1974 this white boy from Alabama married a black man, Ernest Clay. And they had their own ceremony and committed themselves to each other.

Of course, in 1974, that marriage wasn't legally recognized. Finally in 2013, when same sex marriage became legal, he married Earnest in a civil ceremony and took Earnest's last name. So, Louie Crew became Louie Crew Clay. Back in 1974 when he was first married, he called Grace Episcopal Cathedral in San Francisco because San Francisco was where he was teaching at the time, and he asked if they could connect him with some other gay Episcopalians so that they could form a support system. And what he heard on the other end of the phone was not support, and *oh, yeah, here's some names of some people who attend church here that we could connect you with*. Instead he heard derisive laughter.

His response was not to leave the ship, but instead he founded Integrity, a newsletter and an organization for LGBT Episcopalians. And he advocated powerfully and persistently for the LGBT community in the church and for the Episcopal Church to change its attitude. He faced opposition. He faced hatred. He overcame a lot.

I was present at General Convention just shortly before his death when he was honored by the Episcopal Church and celebrated and recognized for the transformative presence

that he had been his entire life. After he died, the Reverend Gay Clark Jennings, who was at that time president of the House of Deputies of the General Convention, wrote on her Facebook page: "Louie changed the face of the church with his gentle spirit and fierce convictions. He loved the Episcopal Church too much to let us stay the way we were. Thanks to his resilient witness, we are more just, more faithful, and look more like the Kingdom of God."

I think of that story as an example of the way that Jesus is with us in the boat. Jesus was in the boat with Louie Crew. And Jesus helped him not only to survive the storm, but to turn his experiences into a blessing for others. To help the boat get to where it really needed to be. Jesus' presence with us in our boats does not mean that we are guaranteed smooth sailing, that every storm will be quieted, every giant slain, and that all will be peace and calm. You know this from personal experience, many of you.

Jesus' presence with us does not mean that we are protected from suffering. Or from illnesses that rob us of our strength and make even the simplest tasks seem overwhelming. Jesus' presence with us does not protect us from seeing loved ones suffer and die. Jesus' presence with us does not mean that we live in some kind of bubble where no harm can come to us. But it does mean that we can rely on Jesus' strength and grace to get us through any storm that we face, any giant who threatens us.

We are not alone. We are accompanied by the power of God. And whatever we face, we do not need to fear. We do not need to fear. This has been the witness of the church through the ages. Jesus' strength is with us to bring us through whatever challenge we face.

I think of so many African American Christians and the challenges that they have faced over the years. You know, Juneteenth, yesterday, was just made a federal holiday. And I will say that until this year, I had no idea what Juneteenth was. I don't know that I'd ever heard of it. And I suspect that's true for many white Americans, but it has been for a long time a critical day for the African American community. For those of you who aren't sure yet what it is, it is commemoration of the day that Union soldiers arrived in Galveston, Texas, two years after the Emancipation Proclamation, to let the enslaved people there know that they were free.

There is no single day that marks freedom for every African-American. That's part of the challenge of finding a day. Juneteenth is the one that the black community largely settled on.

They survived the storm of slavery. Many of them relied on God's strength and have continued to rely on God's strength through the challenges they face going forward, challenges like the destruction of the community in Tulsa, Oklahoma -- a comfortable, free and thriving African American community that was destroyed by white people who burned it down and massacred something on the order of 300 people there. These are the stories that many of us don't know, were never taught. And yet they are the story of a faithful people's storm and of the God who brings them through it.

We all have our own stories of the storms that we have suffered and the ways that Jesus has been present with us in the boat. That is our trust, our faith. Jesus is in this boat with us. Whatever we face may not be easy. It may be painful. But with Jesus with us, we will not perish. Jesus is in the boat with us, and he brings peace even in the middle of the storm. Thanks be to God.