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## *Does Our Faith Rock the Boat?*

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*Exodus 5:1-9; John 5:1-13*

Last August in the high desert of northern New Mexico I did my annual preparation for preaching in the upcoming year at Westminster. When I got to this Sunday, I mulled over the two scripture texts – John, from the end of the first century, and Exodus, from many centuries earlier – and, oddly enough, they pointed me to a 1950 musical comedy, *Guys and Dolls*.

Given our sensitivity these days about gender language it would have been called something else, but *Guys and Dolls* has some fun music and even a bit of wisdom to impart that offers perspective on our two texts this morning. If you've never seen the play you'll soon have a chance: it's coming to the Guthrie next summer!

There's a scene in *Guys and Dolls* at the Save-A-Soul Salvation Army mission where one of the characters, a gangster named Nicely-Nicely Johnson, offers testimony in the form of a song. The song tells of a dream Nicely has in which he's on a ship sailing to heaven but is standing on the deck with gambling dice in his hand. "Sit down, sit down, sit down, sit down" the rest of the passengers in the dream sing. "Sit down 'cause you're rockin' the boat."

Next he's standing on board the ship in his dream with a bottle of whiskey and they sing at him again. "Sit down, sit down, sit down, sit down, sit down 'cause you're rockin' the boat."

Finally a big wave washes him overboard and just before he goes under he wakes up – and then sings again to himself, "Sit down, sit down, sit down, sit down. Sit down 'cause you're rockin' the boat."

The song becomes, in a way, the center of the musical. The pious faithful at the Salvation Army, it turns out, *rock the boat* of the gangsters. By the end of the show they reform their ways. Gambler Sly Masterson marries Sergeant Sarah Brown of the Salvation Army and becomes a drummer in the Save-A-Soul marching band. Adelaide the nightclub dancer weds Nathan Detroit the gangster, who changes his ways and opens a newsstand.

Maybe you remember the story. It's corny and fun and more than slightly moralizing – but it's also a story at least partly repeated many times over in real life: the awakening of faith that can cause transformation. Go to any Alcoholics Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous meeting and you'll hear about it. People's lives can take a different tack when they stop and go deep and discover a power higher than themselves and gain perspective on how they've been living.

Christian faith, it turns out, changes lives, in ways big and small

In another church I served, after worship one Sunday a new member came up to me with a complaint. He was a retired police officer. He'd been a homicide detective who had recently rediscovered his faith, having left the church some 30 years earlier. His complaint? His life had changed and he was having to adjust in lots of different ways. "Someone cut me off while I was driving the other day," he said,

“And I caught myself just as I was about to make what, has been my favorite gesture, reinforced with some of my favorite words. But now I can’t do that anymore and I used to really enjoy it.”

His boat had been rocked, and in that small way – learning to restrain his anger, which probably showed itself in other areas of his life – his life had changed.

*Does our faith rock the boat?* Not only in little ways, but sometimes in life-altering ways?

My favorite story about adult baptism you may have heard me tell before. It happened in that same congregation. One of the musicians we hired to play regularly in our worship services asked to see me one day. She said she’d never been part of a church and had no religious experience at all in her background. She simply came and played the music and then left. But, in hearing all those prayers and scripture readings, sermons and sacred music week after week, something had begun stirring in her. We talked several more times, about the Bible, about Christianity, about worshipping God, about coming to faith, about Jesus.

Finally she asked how she could become part of the church. I said we’d have to baptize her, and she told me she that’s what she wanted. When the day came it was a powerful moment for all of us. People had known her as a musician who came from outside the congregation to play in our worship, but they knew nothing of the story of her journey of conversion. She was weeping, as was everyone else, as the water from the font ran down her face and dripped onto the floor.

When I saw her the next Sunday she came up to me all excited and told me she’d had to stay home from work for three days. She had called her boss to ask for time off because the experience of baptism had so thrown her she needed time to re-orient her life. As she told me of her experience my own

Christianity felt so puny. *Sometimes we forget or dismiss the power of coming to faith.* That musician was in seminary a year later and now serves as a Presbyterian pastor.

Jesus is in the boat-rocking business. In today's parlance he'd be called a disruptor. He subverts the way things are – not only systems of injustice, but also in much more personal ways in our lives and our relationships. If our Christianity doesn't destabilize and challenge us then we might not be paying close enough attention.

Our faith should knock us off balance, at least once in a while. Whether that's in the gestures we make or the language we use, the attitudes we have or the way we spend money, how we exercise power or how we live with our neighbors, *Christianity is anything but passive.* It's a faith we practice, and put into real life and use, and it changes us.

There's a rebellious quality to our faith. Jesus displays it most obviously when he breaks the Sabbath law by healing a paralyzed man. One of the Ten Commandments declares that Jews were to “remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.” For centuries that had been interpreted as doing no labor of any kind on the day of rest. Some Jewish congregations and movements still view the commandment like that today.

But Jesus turns the law on its head; for him, to heal someone is holy whenever it happens, and it takes precedent over tradition. *Keeping the Sabbath* is not limited to maintaining a ritual simply for the sake of following the rules. What can be more holy than healing a person suffering paralysis?

Here's how John tells the story:

“A man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he

said to him, 'Do you want to be made well?'

The sick man answered him, 'Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.'"

Imagine that: for 38 years, trying to drag his paralyzed body into the healing waters of the pool but being bumped out of the way by able-bodied people. Over and over, day after day, for nearly four decades. Out of compassion Jesus says to him,

"'Stand up, take your mat and walk.'

"At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.

Now that day was a sabbath. So the Jewish leaders said to the man who had been cured, 'It is the sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your mat.'"

In other words, "Sit down, sit down, sit down, sit down. Sit down 'cause you're rockin' the boat."

Rules can cloud our vision sometimes. It happens still today. We Presbyterians are really good at it. We are known for being sticklers on *order and process and protocol* - which sometimes causes us to miss the point of faith. And when that happens we don't take many chances. We become risk averse. Faith like that doesn't rock many boats, or change many lives, or alter many systems.

Jesus is not the first boat-rocker in the Bible. In fact, scripture is full of them. Moses does it ages earlier, when he goes with his brother Aaron to

visit Pharaoh to ask for a three-day break for the Hebrew people so they might worship God.

The request unsettles the peace that has kept things in balance in Pharaoh's Egypt, and causes turmoil that had been kept to a minimum on the backs of the Hebrew people. But Moses pushes the boundaries for the sake of his oppressed people. The king gets angry and doubles down on the work required of his Israelite slaves, making it impossible for them to meet their quota. In effect, telling the Hebrews to sit down and stop rockin' the boat. Leave the status quo alone.

That injustice is too much, and the die is cast. Pharaoh's treatment of the Hebrew people turns the tide toward the liberation movement that becomes the Exodus. The request of Moses for a three-day retreat in the wilderness turns into the demand to "Let my people go." Period. It's a defining moment for the Hebrew people. The dominant order is about to be overturned. Subversion has commenced. The boat is rocked.

Moses and Jesus are both on a mission from God – arising out of an encounter with the Almighty at a burning bush, in the case of Moses, and coming after 40 days in the desert, for Jesus. Everybody else – the enslaved Hebrew people, the disabled man at the pool in Jerusalem, *all of us* - everybody else is simply doing their best to be faithful and avoid any problems and keep their head above water. Like so many of us.

But in each instance it's the common believers that take the brunt of the anger. The Temple leaders vent not at Jesus but at the man he heals, for standing and picking up his mat on the Sabbath. Pharaoh takes it out on not on Moses, but on the Hebrew people, whom he accuses of being lazy and defiant when they can't meet their work quota.

In other words, even if we keep our head down and try not to rock the boat, following our faith may eventually land us in trouble.

Moses and Jesus are disruptors, but most of us are not. Most of us are rule-following, law-abiding citizens, religiously and politically, and that's a good thing. A peaceful social order depends on that. We live by accepted, shared cultural norms, and we keep pursuing those norms even as it gets harder and harder. Most of us are not boat-rockers out to disrupt the present order of things. The status quo is working well for most of us. The *world* may need disrupting and *we* may need it in our personal lives, but those aren't easy places for us.

I know I find it difficult to confront systems that are unjust. It's not easy to stand here and talk about racism or misogyny. That makes me uncomfortable. It's not my go-to place.

Yet, sometimes our faith pushes us in that direction. Westminster has learned this and has stood up on public issues. Our congregation has spoken up against current gun laws. Westminster took a stance in support of marriage equality. Our congregation has supported legislation for affordable housing and changes in the criminal justice system.

Christian faith changes lives – and systems – in ways big and small.

Our church has taken positions on public issues and policies that we feel do not reflect God's intentions for the human family, as discerned through scripture study and prayer. We have rocked the boat and worked with others for justice. But that doesn't mean we're comfortable doing it.

Most of us – and I am in this category, too – prefer a quieter, more nuanced Christianity, a comfortable faith that doesn't ask too much of us. A little voice inside tells us not to rock the boat, whether it's working against systemic inequity or making changes in our personal lives. We'd just as soon stay seated.

Yet Jesus expects more from us. Those places in our lives where we need to change – and we all know where they are – are waiting for us to face them with courage, and then to act. And the injustices we see all around us in the city and the nation and the world cry out for transformation and call us to join with others in working for change.

The good news, *the good news*, is that Jesus has already given us all we need to make the change we sense is required in our world and in our lives – *to stand up and rock the boat*:

*faith* that gives us strength and courage,  
*hope* that one day will be fulfilled, and  
*love* that cannot be stopped.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

## **Pastoral Prayer ~10:30 am Worship**

David Shinn

God of wind, rain and snow, the world witnessed and trembled at the power of your majestic creation. From your dazzling cosmos to the force of the hurricane, you are God and you are mighty. Yet you are mindful of every human being and created us just a little lower than the angels. When we stray away from your love, you call us back with the urging of your prophets. At the fullness of time, you sent your Son Jesus to fully demonstrate and embody your love for your creation. For your name is great, and we worship you as our God.

Loving God, look upon this world, we pray, that you will pour forth your soothing grace. Pour out your comfort for all who are suffering from the aftermath of the crushing waves of tsunami in Indonesia, and the howling wind of the hurricane in Florida and southern states. Spread out your love for the grieving hearts, injured bodies, and post-traumatic spirits. Guide the volunteers who are heeding the calls for help from all states, especially those coming from our state this day, as they reach out to all who are in need. Bless the rescue and relief workers as they clear debris, restore power and clean water, and begin the long road to healing.

God of peace, you created this world and called it good. Yet we do not follow your path for peace. We pray for conflicts around the world. Bring peace to Cameroon, to Palestine and Israel, to South Sudan, and other war torn nations. We pray for all who are terrorized by the arm conflicts and the threat of civil war. We pray for our Cameroon community here in our church and community who are troubled by the news of their home. We lift up to you all who are caught in the crossfire and displaced by wars, we pray for the refugees seeking for basic needs and security. Protect and have mercy on them O Lord.

For our community here at Westminster, we pray for all who are seeking health for their bodies, minds and spirits. Place your hands upon our loved ones who are preparing for surgery, chemo treatment, and rehab. Bless them with healing of their bodies. Soothe all who are living with mental illness and the struggles they face each day that are beyond our comprehensive but not our compassion. Comfort the grieving spirits of those whose hearts are made heavy by the death of their dear ones.

O Disruptor of faith, in you we move and have our being, lead us to be your light and salt here in our community and in the world. Let us never be afraid to rock the status quo. Let not our complacency stymie the call to action. Let not the rigidity of rules stop us. Let your power in us be the courage to forge new path of faith in action. With compassion of Christ, with the love of God, and the power of the Living Spirit, may we be the transformed people standing against injustice, ushering peace, feed the starving multitude, and set the captives free.

With this confidence of your moving Spirit, we now pray the prayer that Jesus has taught us all to pray, Our Father...