

All About Boats

John 17:20-26

CWZepp, BWCOB, May 20, 2007

What is almost three and half football fields long, 15 decks high, weighs in at over 137,000 gross tons, and cost \$700 million to make? And what can accommodate over 5000 people while seating nearly 2000 people for dinner, and features an ice-skating rink, an in-line skating track, a rock-climbing wall, a miniature golf course, a five-story theater, and a \$12 million art budget?

It is called Voyager of the Seas, and when it was completed in 1999, it was hailed as a revolution in the world of luxury cruise liners. Richard Fain, CEO of Royal Caribbean, wanted to expand their market share not just by cutting into some other cruise line's business, but by building a ship to attract "non-cruise people" – folks who normally would never even think about taking a cruise. Considering that only about 11% of Americans have ever been on a cruise, it seemed like a reasonable plan.

So Royal Caribbean set about the task of finding out how they could attract the other 89% of Americans who had never climbed aboard. They commissioned a survey of 1000 Americans to learn about their vacation preferences. And what they discovered is that people want a vacation that gives them everything. They want beaches and museums; gourmet cuisine on Sunday and pizza on Monday; they want to hike in the afternoon and gamble in the evening. They want to bowl and watch movies; to play golf and go shopping; to lounge by the pool and share cocktails at the bar. In short, they want options.

And so Royal Caribbean built the Voyager of the seas. They sought to make everything you could want in a vacation available on their ships in order to persuade new people to come on board. The result was the world's largest cruise ship – 25 percent bigger than any other cruise ship plying the seas at that time.

But that didn't last long. Only eight years later, Voyager of the Seas and her 4 identical sister ships have already fallen to number 3 on the list of world's largest passenger ships. First it was Cunard's Queen Mary 2 in 2003. Then Royal Caribbean came back with Freedom of the Seas in 2006. And plans are already underway at Royal Caribbean for an even bigger Genesis class of cruise ships, set to be completed sometime in 2009, featuring more options, more amenities, and the promise of more vacation dollars for Royal Caribbean cruise lines.

Now before Royal Caribbean went out and built the world's largest cruise ship, they needed to know the purpose of the company's existence. Being that first and foremost that purpose was to make money, the next step was to figure out how they could make more money doing what they did, which was cruises. So they did their homework and discovered that more people might consider taking a cruise if, in doing so, they could live and vacation as though they were not on a cruise. In short, they wanted all the attractions, amenities, and activities available on land, and if they could get all those on a boat for an attractive price – great!

Now I have never been on a cruise, and I must admit that, in general, cruises hold very little appeal for me. But it strikes me that there is something more than a bit ironic about building a boat for people who don't particularly want to be on a boat. In fact, I might say that it defeats the purpose of having a boat. It might be great for making money, but it sure isn't going to help people love the sea.

I first came across information about Voyager of the Seas as I was reading a preaching journal from a few years ago in preparation for this sermon. The article was called "Voyager Church", and it lifted up Royal Caribbean's new ship as an example for the church in a new day. Just as the cruise company needed to retool itself in order to hold its own and gain headway in the competitive vacation industry, it said, so too does the church need to retool itself in order to survive and thrive in a new day. And it starts, they insinuated, with giving the people what they want.

Now I am by no means an advocate of unchanging traditionalism. And generally speaking, I am one who believes that the church needs to be open to new ideas, new energy, and new ways of being. But I have a deep and fundamental disagreement with those who suggest that the church should be driven by market forces. Responding to the whims and desires of consumers is fine and necessary for a business that is trying to turn a profit. But a church is very different from a business, and a church should be driven by a different and a higher purpose.

And that brings us to this morning's scripture. It is part of Jesus' so called "High Priestly Prayer" in the Gospel of John, and as such, it may be thought of kind of like Jesus' "last will and testament" in that Gospel. These verses form the conclusion of that prayer, and Jesus has already prayed for himself and his disciples. Now he turns to the church universal – to "not only these, but those who will believe in me through their word." Here, Jesus is praying for you and I – for all those who have come to faith in Christ.

The part of this pericope that typically gets the most attention is Jesus' plea for the disciples and those that follow to be "one". These words have become a rallying cry for the ecumenical movement, and a constant lament for those who look on the church and see nothing but division. But I want to focus on a different part of the text this morning. Because while Jesus does pray here for unity among his followers, it is not unity for its own sake. Rather, he prays for unity with a very specific purpose. Christ prays that his followers might be one – one with the Father and one with himself – *so that the world might believe that he was sent by God the Father*. Likewise, the glory that Jesus has been given by God he has also passed on to his followers – *so that the world might believe not only that Jesus was sent by God, but also that they are loved by God even as he is loved by God*.

The oneness that Jesus prays for his disciples and us is not an end in itself. Indeed, it comes with a purpose – to be a witness of the love and glory of God in Jesus Christ.

Now I want to jump back to the Voyager Cruise Line for a moment. I have already said that I didn't much appreciate the implication that the church should replicate the business strategy and methods that led Royal Caribbean to produce Voyager of the Seas and now other monster cruise ships. But I do appreciate the idea of using a boat as a metaphor for the church. Because a boat has a very simple, very specific purpose, inherent in its very definition – to enable people to work and travel on the water. And

likewise the church has a very simple and straightforward purpose – to be a witness of the love and glory of God in Jesus Christ.

When I think of Voyager of the Seas, I wonder if I might just be looking at a boat that has lost its purpose. And when I look at the church, I often wonder whether we have lost our sense of purpose too.

Because neither a boat nor the church is meant to be an end unto itself. But like many people now hoping on board a luxury cruise liner to go shopping, watch movies, eat pizza, and play blackjack, I suspect that many in the church have come to think of the church not for its purpose, but for its amenities.

Even our language reflects this way of thinking (or perhaps it shapes our way of thinking as linguistic philosophy might suggest.) We talk about what worship styles people prefer, what programs attract young families, what kinds of music the different generations relate to, what activities are available for our children, how we can best maintain our facilities, how we can recruit new people to play on the church softball team (which by the way, there is a practice today at 4 pm).

And there is nothing wrong with any of this. But in the midst of all these things, we often forget that they are not what makes a church, and we forget that our purpose extends far beyond the maintenance and welfare of an organization. In short, we become more concerned about our boat than about our mission or our destination.

And when that happens – when we lose sight of our purpose of being a witness to the love and glory of God in Jesus Christ – we end up competing with other boats. We want to have the biggest, the best, the most excellent boat. We want to give people what they want so that they choose our boat rather than the one down the street. So we add more and more stuff to our boat and before you know it, you can hardly tell the difference between the stuff on the boat and the stuff on land. And rather than trying to sell others on the beauty and goodness of some distant shore that we could show them, we spend our energy trying to convince people how great our boat is and why they should choose to spend some time on ours.

Now some would say that our problem is that we have too many boats, too many different churches and denominations – that what we need is for us all to be in the same boat, one true church. In fact, some Christians believe that there is only one boat, one true church, and that any outside of it are at best lifeboats that got separated during a storm and which they hope might one day be recovered.

But when Jesus prayed that his followers might be one, I doubt that he was thinking about an institutional body. I am not convinced that Jesus was or is concerned about the existence of multiple denominations or communions of the faith. And I do not believe that Jesus was worried that his followers would end up out on the high seas in a bunch of smaller boats when they could have traveled all together on one big barge.

But I do believe that Jesus would have been concerned if, after he sent out his disciples on a fishing trip, with a mission to return to him with a full catch of people pulled from the raging sea, his followers forgot their purpose, and instead of bringing others back to him, ended up simply cruising around the sea, making improvements to their boat and trying to convince those on other boats to jump ship and try out their own.

That is the kind of disunity I think Jesus wanted his followers to avoid. When he prayed for his disciples to be one, he wasn't praying for them to all be in the same boat. In fact, he sent them out in different directions, in different boats to reach different people in different waters. But what he longed for and what he was praying for in this text, I believe, was that his followers would all share the same harbor, that they would bring their boats to rest in the same waters – to be with him where he was – to dock in the deep waters of the living God.

The only reason we have a boat – the purpose for which the church exists – is to go out and invite others to come travel with us to that place. We have but a small boat in a big sea – but we have a great and noble purpose to fulfill. May we all be one as we work toward that purpose, as we witness to the love and glory of God in Christ Jesus and bring others on board as we journey to the harbor of the living God. Amen.

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ –
 Friend and hero, savior and encourager,
 comforter of widows, washer of feet & healer of disease –
 show us the way to care deeply for one another.
 Teach us to love as you love –
 Unconditionally
 Without fear or favor
 Without pride or prejudice
 Without hope or expectation of return.

Jesus, brother, how often we fail to recognize you!
 We are more comfortable with your divinity,
 more ready to accept you as a victorious savior.
 How often we fail to receive you
 when you come as one of us.
 We are often afraid to reach out or look into your eyes
 when you confront us as a stranger or a prisoner,
 an enemy or a beggar,
 a malnourished child or a victim of AIDS.

And yet there you are – in the flesh,
 inviting us to share in your life.

Lord Jesus, open our eyes and our arms
 that we might recognize and receive you,
 whenever you come to us.

Amen