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A Good Place to Be – Together on the Boat

By The Rev. Rachel Rickenbaker

The other day, James and I took a day trip getaway to Harper's Ferry. As we hiked along the Shenandoah River, we looked out and saw people kayaking, canoeing, and tubing in the sparkling waters. For a moment as I wiped my brow, I wondered why we weren't out there, rather than hiking in the hot sun. Then I remembered – navigating in the water is also quite a workout.

Seeing those on the water took me back to my experience as a young girl at scout camp, when I first learned to canoe. What a process -- even getting into the canoe took teamwork. Then, once we were on the lake, we had to work together as some paddled on one side and some on the other. If we saw a rock or log blocking the way, we had to make sure one of us was paddling forward while another paddled away from the canoe.

In order to earn our canoe badge, we even had to flip the canoe and then figure out how to get everyone back in safely without swamping it. That experience involved teamwork and trust and built great relationships among

us. And when we got from point A to point B, it was immensely gratifying, and I felt like I had come to know those in my canoe all the better.

Reflecting on that experience and my time on the water since, it is no wonder to me that Christians from the beginning have seen boats as symbols of the Church. Today, with cruise ships, motorboats, solo canoes, and single kayaks, we have lost some of the full sense of the teamwork involved from everyone aboard in steering a boat.

Throughout the years, in order to travel on water, sailors – even Jesus and his disciples – had to work together to make the journey successfully. Someone had to tie knots and raise and lower the sails. Another had to be a lookout for what was ahead. Others had to pull the oars. Everyone on board would likely have a job, but that made for smoother sailing.

The Church is like a boat. It is meant to be a sanctuary through the rough, confusing, and ever-changing waters of life. We even use nautical language to refer to the structures of many church buildings. The “nave,” for instance, from the Latin root word for “boat,” is the area inside the church where most of the people sit.

Gathering as Church – whether we are in a building, outdoors, in someone’s home, or even online for a time – is how we come together for respite and strength. God knows our lives can be exhausting. This does not mean that the church shields us from suffering or difficulty. Even the most experienced sailors can find themselves in rough winds, storms, and choppy waters.

Yet, being with those onboard is certainly a better place to be than navigating on our own. As we have learned so vividly during this global pandemic, the Church is so much more than a building. It is most importantly the people of the Body of Christ. The Church is made up of people who work together, share in community, encourage and celebrate with one another, stand together in the hard times, and help each other navigate the course of this Christian life.

It is so easy for us when we become disheartened in life to set off on our own. As another Christian said to me recently, “I feel like for a while, I lost course and went my own way. It’s good to be back with my church family.”

The Church is not made up of perfect people, that is for certain. Like Peter struggling to walk on water, we very clearly show we need a Savior. So, the Holy Spirit works through us, giving us strength and courage, even when times get tough.

It's also important to remember that boats are generally not stationary. They are meant to help us get from one place to another. The Church is not meant to keep to itself, to wait passively for others to come to us. We are not to be passive, like cruise ship passengers, but active sailors, going *out* to minister to a world in need of the good news of God in Christ.

Navigating isn't easy. It takes teamwork. It takes trust. It takes effort. But we are not alone. Most importantly, God is working with and through us.

When the waters are smooth or when the waters are rough, a good place to be is with those on the boat.