

“We’re All Sailing in the Same Boat”

Reformation Sunday C (October 27, 2019)

Scripture Readings: Isaiah 32:14-17; Luke 8:22-25; Galatians 5:25

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>>Open our eyes that we might see wondrous things in your word, Amen.<<

October 25, 1959 was the date of First Congregational Church of Ithaca’s first Sunday morning service held here in Cayuga Heights. It was called “Opening Sunday.” This week I dug through an old filing cabinet downstairs that’s filled with bulletins from past services, and lo and behold, in the file of bulletins from 1959 there was one from October 25. Because we’re celebrating the 60th anniversary, I wanted to include a copy of that old bulletin as an insert in today’s bulletin. In an age before computers, the first thing that stands out to me when I look at that 1959 bulletin is how streamlined it is. Everything is single spaced. Words to the Doxology, the Gloria Patri, and the Lord’s Prayer are not printed. There’s only one scripture reading instead of three. And just one bulletin was printed for two Sunday morning services: 9:30 and 11am (the children’s sermon was only in the first service). Notice also that Reverend Howard Quirk’s sermon title is shorter than mine tend to be (my sermon title for today is short-ish but it’s still seven words; his was just five). And notice also that the sermon back then was at the end of the service instead of in the middle. But our forebears of 60 years ago did manage to keep extra spaces in the order of service to let latecomers enter, marked by four asterisks and a note: “Latecomers will please be seated at these times.” We tend to be a bit more “free-range” nowadays when it comes to arriving after 10am. What really caught my eye, though, as I looked at that old bulletin was how spare the announcements were. The announcements section of their bulletin fit on half a page. We squeeze our announcements into four or five pages, and sometimes more.

For all the differences, there are also many similarities between our congregation today and our FCCI forebears. The second announcement in their bulletin - on the back of the insert - mentions a “Highland Highlights.” Back then it was in print form; today we email the Highlights every Wednesday. The church office back then produced a calendar of upcoming events; we still produce such a calendar today. And, as we still do today, our forebears also asked for volunteers to do stuff. I don’t see an announcement asking for ushers, but there are requests for someone to design a new bulletin cover, and for someone to paint the church name and street number on a new mailbox. And there’s also a request in those announcements for groups to clear dates with the church office if they wanted to use the space. One of those groups was a Boy Scout Troop; Boy Scouts still meet in our church to this day. There’s one final thing that caught my eye in that old bulletin. The FCCI of 60 years ago collaborated with other faith groups in town to help refugees - something we still do today through the Ithaca Sanctuary Alliance. On November 6, 1959, according to their bulletin calendar, our members were to meet at First Methodist Church in support of refugees in southeast Asia. In fact, the bulletin cover from October 25, 1959 contained a note about “World Refugee Year,” something churches and countries throughout the world at the time were participating in, including our members.

It’s interesting isn’t it to peer back 60 years and catch a glimpse - a snapshot - of church life. Looking back is one trait of millennia-old religious traditions like Christianity. We have such a rich, textured, diverse tradition - a veritable playground for history buffs. Historian David

Chidester calls the story of Christianity a “sweeping epic that moves from ancient origins, through the historical transitions of the medieval and Byzantine periods, to the religious transformations of the modern world.”¹ Rich and layered and ever-evolving. Oxford historian Diarmaid MacCulloch once made the funny comment that Christian history is too big for any one scholar to fully comprehend. “There are two thousand years’ worth of Christian stories to tell,” he writes, “which may seem a daunting task for historians who [follow the] modern . . . professional expectatio[n] that a true scholar knows a lot about not very much.”² All the liturgical, doctrinal, theological, artistic, architectural, musical diversity of Christianity over its centuries-long life provides a cafeteria-like bounty for hungry souls to select just the right dish for them.

In a recent article, Timothy Egan tells a story about one aspect of Christian history that helped him cure what he calls a “malnutrition of the soul.”³ “Not long ago,” he writes, “I found myself inside a place that claims to be the oldest church in the English-speaking world - St. Martin’s in Canterbury, England. [It’s just] a few steps from the start of the ancient pilgrimage trail of the Via Francigena. [St. Martin’s church] was my first stop on a pathway of more than a thousand miles,” he says. “[The Via Francigena is] a trail from that modest clump of sixth-century stone and brick [called St. Martin’s, all the way south] to the Vatican Outside St. Martin’s,” he writes, “was a small welcoming sign: ‘We do not have all the answers. We are on a spiritual journey.’ Inside [the church], there were no more than 20 people at a midmorning Sunday service. . . . A woman seized me immediately, sensing a fresh soul. Welcome, welcome, welcome!’ she exclaimed. She took me forcefully by the arm and guided me to a tray of baked goods. ‘Would you like a cookie?’ . . . One reason I wanted to follow the Via Francigena, which was first charted in the year 990,” says Egan, “was to experience layers of time on consecrated ground. There’s barely a village along the way that has not played host to some life-changing event. . . . But I had a deeper motive to get moving, mostly on foot, over that sanctified pathway. . . . We are spiritual beings,” he says. “But for many of us, malnutrition of the soul is a plague of modern life. That’s one reason 200 million people worldwide a year make some form of religious pilgrimage. In the vacuous tumult of the [current political] era, I was looking for something durable,” he says: “a stiff shot of no-nonsense spirituality.”

Timothy Egan found some spiritual nourishment in Christian history - an ancient church (St. Martin’s), consecrated ground and a sanctified pathway (the Via Francigena) walked by millions over the centuries. And as he walked the trail, he says, he experienced a sense of awe at its deep and meaningful history. Speaking for myself, the beauty of being part of an ancient tradition is that we don’t have to reinvent the spiritual wheel to feed a malnourished soul. Our tradition provides a banquet of dishes to choose from. If you’re of a mystical persuasion, there are countless mystics in our tradition who offer techniques for connecting more deeply with the divine - Anthony the Great, Hildegard of Bingen, Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila - all come to mind as guides. If you connect with the divine more powerfully through the mind, there are great intellectuals in our tradition - Augustine, Aquinas, Erasmus, Protestant Reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin, Puritans like Jonathan Edwards, or modern theologians like Catherine Keller. If it’s art or music that feeds your soul, is there anything better on the planet than Bach’s *St. Matthew’s Passion*, or the Gregorian chants from the days of Charlemagne, or the stunning beauty of Sandro Botticelli’s 15th century

¹ David Chidester, *Christianity: A Global History* (New York: HarperOne, 2000), vii.

² Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 1-2.

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/19/opinion/sunday/religion-faith-catholic-pilgrimage.html?smid=tw-nytopinion&smtyp=cur>

painting of the Annunciation? If spiritual formation is what you crave, you could spend years just in the 20th century, following the writings of Thomas Merton or Richard Foster or Thomas Keating or Henry Nouwen. And if it's social action you desire, Gustavo Gutierrez, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King Jr., and a host of others stand ready to lead by example.

Looking back, whether it's 60 years to 1959, 600 years to the age of the mystics, 1600 years to the time when Christianity wrestled with its identity, or 2000 years to the very beginnings of our tradition - looking back helps us to see that we don't sail this ship called church alone. There are countless forebears who help us raise the sails to catch the wind of God's spirit as it blows through us. Today's reading from St. Paul's Letter to the Galatians calls this openness to God's spirit, "walking by the spirit." Paul uses a Greek military term to describe this walking. The image is of our church on the front lines with rank upon rank of forebears behind us providing support. God's spirit moves through us, says Paul; we follow the spirit's lead; and legions of ancestors in the faith support us as we move forward.

Back in June, I used Joan Gray's book *Sailboat Church* in a sermon to describe a church that lets go of the oars and lets the wind of God fill its sails - it's a church that *sails* by the spirit, to modify St. Paul's expression.⁴ "The adventures of Sailboat churches," she writes, "often push them beyond the wisdom, money, and abilities they [think they] have."⁵ Contrast this with the rowboat church. "If a congregation is doing mission in such a way that it is never challenged beyond its own resources," she says, "it is probably rowing instead of sailing."⁶ The rowboat church, she says, falls prey to "everything in our culture [which] tells us that if we are smart enough, rich enough, and talented enough, we can do anything we want." But, she goes on, "one of the basic truths of sailing is that we don't make the wind blow."⁷ Here's how she describes the difference between a church that sails and a church that doesn't: "In marinas all around the world," she writes, "there are boats that seldom leave the dock. They remain tied up there, perhaps used as places to entertain or relax, even to live on, but their sails are rarely raised. They hardly ever engage the wind in the partnership of sailing. So it is with many churches. They have beautiful buildings, run programs that are of educational and therapeutic value to the people who attend, and may engage in a variety of good works. However they seldom cast off, raise the sails, and allow [God's spirit] to move them away from the dock"⁸

A church that sails - *people* who sail in their faith - are willing to try new things. A church that sails takes risks, trusting that a divine Presence bigger than them is also piloting the boat. A church that sails charts a course with two thousand years of tradition as a guide. A church that sails lives into the world that God intends for all people. A sailing church learns with the disciples in today's gospel reading that Jesus is *also* in the boat with the power of his example to make a way when there seems to be no way, urging them to sail ahead in faith. "Sailors learn to let the boundless power of the wind move them where they need to go."⁹ They sense the movements of the wind and adjust accordingly. They see injustice in the world and they respond. They see violence and they advocate for peace. They see hate and they live more fully into love. They see a hurting planet, and they proclaim God's love for

⁴ Joan S. Gray, *Sailboat Church: Helping Your Church Rethink Its Mission and Practice* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014).

⁵ Gray, *Sailboat Church*, 12.

⁶ Gray, *Sailboat Church*, 12-13.

⁷ Gray, *Sailboat Church*, 53.

⁸ Gray, *Sailboat Church*, 13.

⁹ Gray, *Sailboat Church*, 6.

creation. They see busyness and distraction pulling people this way and that in life, and they offer peace and community and a healthier way to be. Sailing churches see pain, and they offer healing. They see suffering, and they offer compassionate presence. They see isolation and exclusion, and they offer welcome and embrace. A church that sails waits, as today's Old Testament reading from Isaiah says, - it waits and senses God's spirit, and then it harnesses the power of divine wind to push ahead. "Anyone who has ever sailed knows," writes Joan Gray, "that sailing is just as much work as rowing. Sailing, however, requires a different kind of activity. Sailors put up and shift the sails, and partner with the wind to move the boat."¹⁰

Today we are looking back 60 years - we're looking back 600, 1600, 2000 years - to see who else is in the boat with us as we chart a course for the future. And each year during stewardship season we plot a chart for the upcoming year, based in part on the commitments we all make in terms of time and money. But this year, let's also think further ahead. Let's think ahead 60 years. What will First Congregational Church of Ithaca look like in the year 2079? Some younger folks in our congregation may still be around to see what we've become. What will *they* say about us if they look back at today's bulletin? I hope they will say, "the members and friends of First Congregational Church in the year 2019 were sailing." Amen.

¹⁰ Gray, *Sailboat Church*, 8.