

“A Shovel of Stars”

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[Text: Mark 4:35-41](#)

In a beautifully imagined and moving novella, And Every Morning The Way Home Gets Longer and Longer, Fredrik Backman, author of the best selling A Man Called Ove, has this brief exchange between Noah and his grandfather who is suffering from dementia:

“Tell me more about school, Noahnoah.” Grandpa asks.

Noah shrugs.

“We don’t count enough and we write too much.”

“That’s always the way. They never learn, the schools.”

Replies Grandpa.

“And we have to write essays all the time! The teacher wanted us to write what we thought the meaning of life was once.”

“What did you write?”

“Company.”

Grandpa closes his eyes.

“That’s the best answer I’ve ever heard.”

“My teacher said I had to write a longer answer.”

“So what did you do?”

“I wrote: Company. And ice cream.”

Grandpa spends a moment or two thinking that over. Then he asks:

“What kind of ice cream?”

Noah smiles. It’s nice to be understood.

I love that scene and Noah’s wise, smiling observation: “It’s nice to be understood.”

Which, I think, is the reason I’m here this morning – because I understand at least *something* of what we are all going through, congregation and pastor, as we stand on the threshold of a new ministry together. We know from experience that transitional times – planned or unplanned - can be unsettling, disorienting as well as energizing. Yet this also we know, that we are – none of us – in this transition alone. That God is with us and that one day, hopefully, it will all make sense. In the meantime we move forward as people of faith, with competent and committed leadership, a skilled and seasoned pastor, and the love of Jesus in our hearts. A day of new beginnings!

With that said, let’s turn to our morning scripture reading that finds Jesus at the end of a long day, spent teaching by the Sea of Galilee, a large crowd pressing to hear him. Evening comes and a kind of lull descends and with it the question of what he and his disciples are going to do next.

Start for home maybe or find a place to lie down and get some rest and a bite of supper, because God knows the day has been long and hard and nobody can keep going forever.

But that's not what Jesus says. Although there can't have been any of them readier to call it a day than he was, Jesus, standing at the water's edge with his tired fishermen friends, says to them, "*Let's go across to the other side.*"

*"And leaving the crowd, they took him with them,
just as he was, in the boat."*

Now it's the dramatic story that follows with the wind and the waves and the sleeping Jesus that usually gets a preacher's attention. Yet this morning I don't want to focus on the storm and how in response to the command of Jesus the wind ran out of breath and the water turned smooth as glass. Rather I want to look with you at the disciples' question, which is quite likely the question many of us have been raising ever since learning that there was to be yet another pastoral change at Campbell UMC: *What are we going to do now?*

I remember how eleven years ago, when we announced *our* decision to retire, people immediately began asking about our future:

*What are you going to do now? What are your plans?
Where will you live? Will you write a book?
Can you still be my friend?
Will you come to my funeral?
Things like that!*

And we knew that people were genuinely interested in *our* plans. But we also knew that the questions were not just about us. For what people were really asking was *what is going to happen to me, to us? What are we going to do now after twenty years under your leadership? You're the only pastors some of us have ever known!*

And to tell the truth, which is all I could tell, all I could say with certainty was that I didn't know *how* it would be for any of us, other than strange and different. For we go, each of us, on our life journey not knowing much for certain about *where* we are in fact headed or what *surprises* lurk along the way. And there were surprises, some of them heart breaking such as the untimely death of Pastor Paul Kim. But you were not broken. And there were some hard times, but you were not hardened. You were ennobled, not embittered.

Which ought to give us courage, knowing that although none of us has more than a clue about *where* we are going in our little tub of boat, as friends and followers of Jesus, we know *how* we are going, for we go in faith, each of us does, trusting that we never go alone, for the gospel truth is that *whoever* we are, *however* we are, *wherever* we are, we are forever and ever held in the embrace of God's patient and persistent love.

That's what Cate reminded us of last Sunday, and it is most deeply what I said to this congregation eleven years ago. And it's most deeply what I've come to say to you this morning . . . urging you to remember -

[That] if God is for us, who is against us? . . . Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship or distress or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Over the years of my ministry no text was voiced more frequently in my pulpits than that one, the wonder of it being that since nothing can separate us from the love of God, then everything - *everything* - links us to that love, whether it be hardship, peril, doubt, distress, great sorrow or deep uncertainty at a time of pastoral transition. *Nothing separates us* so everything *links us* to the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Now I do not pretend to understand the deepest mystery of that love, but I trust it, for it's what the cross is about, and the empty tomb. It's what grace is about. It's the dimension of love *we are in always and forever*.

I was moved by something I read in the recent Christian Century magazine. It's an exchange between South African church leader Peter Storey and his father who was dying of heart disease in his fifties. Storey was predictably angry. "Why should this remarkable man be taken so soon?" he asked. But one day, when the two were together, the father explained to his son, "Peter, God has trusted me with this illness." He didn't say, "God has *sent* me this illness." Instead, what he was saying was, "Now that I have this illness, God is *trusting me* with the bearing of it." ¹

Isn't that great! "*God is trusting me with the bearing of it.*"

Paralyzed since a gymnastics accident at the age of 24, Tomihiro Hoshino learned to write with a pen and to paint with a brush clenched between his teeth. He also came to trust in the love and grace of a God who was with him in his affliction and who would trust him with the bearing of it. And so he writes:

*I believe in rain. I believe in wind.
I believe in heat. I believe in coldness.
I believe in pleasure. I believe in suffering. I believe in tomorrow.
If I believe, rain is a blessing, and wind is a song.
If I believe, the blossoms bloom even on a winter twig.*

*If I believe . . . whether I stand or fall,
I am in the palms of Your hands.*

¹ Peter Marty, "The Christian Century," June 21, 2017.

"What are we going to do now?" they asked him. "Go to the other side," he replied simply.

And taking him with them just as he was, they went bravely not knowing how far the other side would be or what awaited them there if anything at all.

And still they go, and we with them in our little tub of a boat, because

to keep going is to keep living, and to stop going is to stop living in any way that matters.

For the last several years, when I haven't been filling in for one or another pastor, hanging out in the mountains, visiting our brilliant grand kids, or traveling somewhere in the world – France, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium - we worshipped most frequently at Wesley United Methodist Church in Japan Town. During that time I learned a huge amount from the extraordinary people in that church, not the least of which was how they dealt with the dark and inexcusable experience of their incarceration when 120,000 of them, men, women and children, were interred in bleak and inhospitable concentration camps in remote spots of this nation's interior, places like Manzanar and Tule Lake, California; Poston, Arizona; Heart Mountain, Wyoming; Topaz, Utah; Jerome, Arkansas; Crystal City, Texas among others.

Moved and challenged by their stories, I've done a lot of reading about the experience, including a remarkable book titled The Art of Gaman, Gaman meaning *enduring the unbearable with patience and dignity*.

Gaman: Enduring the unbearable with patience and dignity!

Designed and created by Delphine Hirasuna, what makes this book so unique is that it doesn't concentrate on the wire fences, clapboard buildings, the lack of privacy, or other extreme conditions of the incarceration, but rather it puts on display an astonishing variety of art, crafts, jewelry, painting, clothing, dolls, games and furniture fashioned by people in those camps, people who refused to be defined or defeated by the injustice of it all.

Trusted with the bearing of humiliation and heartbreak, these folk understood full well that bad, terrible and unjust stuff happens all the time. Yet life is not just about what can go wrong; it's about where we choose to look, or see, or how we pay attention. And more importantly it's about recognizing that *we have something to say about how the story ends!*²

² From Carol Dweck's marvelous book Mindset: A New Psychology of Success.

What are we going to do now?" they asked. "Go to the other side," he replied. "Go for God's sake, and for your own sake too, and for the world's sake. Climb into your little tub of a boat and keep going."

And taking him with them just as he was, they went bravely not knowing how far the other side would be or what awaited them there if anything at all. Yet they went because to keep going is to keep living, and to stop going is to stop living in any way that matters. It's a choice, Church! What will it be?

I end with this. Some lines from Carl Sandburg that I left with you eleven years ago. They seemed appropriate then; they seem appropriate now. Writes Sandburg in his long poem, *The People Yes*:

*In the darkness with a great bundle of grief,
the people march.
In the night and overhead a shovel of stars
for keeps the people march:*

*'Where to? What next?'*³

Dear friends, we can only guess about *where to* and *what next*. It's like trying to pin the tail on the donkey in a spinning room while wearing a blindfold and being lucky if we don't pin it on another guest. Still *the people march* because sitting by the wayside, or bailing out, or choosing to sink without a struggle is not really an option. The future comes and if we don't go to meet it, it tumbles us like an incoming ocean wave.

And so we march . . . in the night . . . with our grief and our fear and our yearning, while

*Overhead, a shovel of stars . . . hovers like a signal, reminding us of the love we're in,
and whose love it is.*

And so we go. And he goes with us, trusting us, enabling us, ennobling us.

*And overhead, overhead,
A Shovel of Stars.*

Let us prepare to be dazzled and blessed!

Amen

³ From "The People Yes," by Carl Sandburg