



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

760 East Broad Street • Columbus Ohio 43205 • (614) 221-6552 • fax (614) 221-5722 • www.bspsc.org

“It’s All about the Boat”

Acts 2:1-12, 41-47

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Reverend Amy Miracle
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, OH

It was a good first day for the church. There was wind and fire and speaking in different languages and Peter gave one heck of a sermon. When the day started 120 people were followers of Jesus. By nightfall that number was 3,000. That’s a twenty-five fold increase in about eight hours. It was a good first day.

What do you think happened the next day? I’m betting that the 120 needed to do a little debriefing. Every week at staff meeting I ask my colleagues two questions:

- What do you want to celebrate from the past week?
- What did we learn since we last met?

Maybe the disciples asked similar questions. They had a lot to celebrate. And a lot to learn. These men and women – these early Christians – figured out a lot of things pretty quickly. They created a community, developed shared practices, integrated new people. They figured out how the many could become one.

When many become one, incredible things can happen.

The 2014 book *The Boys in the Boat* is built around the story of eight rowers and one coxswain, all from working-class families, who, during the Great Depression, won a gold medal at the 1936 Olympics in Germany. Author Daniel James Brown comes at the story of these University of Washington rowers from many different directions, always returning to the question of how many become one.

Brown focuses on one particular rower named Joe Rantz. Joe’s mother dies when he is six, and as his father struggles to find work, he’s shuttled back and forth between various relatives and his father. One afternoon in 1929, when Joe is 15 years old, he comes home from school to find the family car packed, his stepmother in the front seat, and the younger kids in the back. “Where are we going?” he asks his father. “I’m not sure . . . But, the thing is, the little kids are going to need a father more than you are. You’re pretty much all grown up now.” “But can’t I just come along?” “No. That won’t work. Look, son, if there’s one thing I figured out about life, it’s that if you want to be happy, you have to learn how to be happy on your own.” And with that, Joe’s father walks to the car, gets in, and drives away, leaving 15-year old Joe on his own.¹

And he somehow figures it out. He fends for himself. He survives. He stays in high school and is accepted to the University of Washington and becomes a part of the rowing team. He makes a vow to himself: never again to let himself depend on anyone else, never to fully trust anyone or anything. He would make it on his own.

But the problem for Joe is that eight-man rowing is the ultimate team sport. You can have the eight strongest rowers in the world, but if they do not pull together, they are nothing. The challenge is to pull each stroke with the greatest possible power, stroke at the greatest possible rate, and do so in perfect eight-part harmony—stroke,

¹ *The Boys in the Boat: Nine Americans and Their Quest Epic Quest for Gold at the 1936 Berlin Olympics*, 2014, p. 58

after stroke, after stroke, after stroke—all under the coxswain’s direction. In rowing, you have to pull together and you have to have each other’s back. The many have to become one. And that proves to be the challenge for both Joe and the University of Washington varsity crew. At times, they are in perfect sync and seem unbeatable; at other times it all falls apart.

Maybe you are familiar with what that feels like. Most if not all of us have had the experience when the team or group we are a part of – at school, at work, at home – aren’t rowing in the same direction. We don’t have each other’s back, the right hand doesn’t know what the left hand is doing, the many don’t become one. Time, energy, goodwill, gifts are wasted. It’s frustrating and tiring. But it happens fairly often. Because it’s not an easy thing to figure out how the many become one.

The Washington rowing program had a secret weapon, a man named George Yeoman Pocock, an Englishman, a great rower, a boat builder and man wise about many things. One day, as he and Joe are having a talk, Pocock tells him, “Joe, when you really start trusting those other boys, you will feel a power at work within you that is far beyond anything you’ve ever imagined. Sometimes, you will feel as if you rowed right off the planet and are rowing among the stars.”² Years later Pocock would make a similar comment to his biographer, “Rowing is a symphony of motion. And when you’re rowing well, why it’s nearing perfection, you’re touching the Divine. It touches the you of yous. Which is your soul.”³

When a team of people work together toward a common purpose and all of you are rowing in the same direction, there’s nothing quite like it. It can happen on a sports team. It can happen in a choir, or band, or orchestra. It can happen on a building site, a commercial kitchen, an operating room. It can happen in an organization. It can happen in a church.

Back to our story about the first days of the church. We know a few names from that initial group: Peter, James, John, but most of the names are unknown to us. And that’s the way it’s supposed to be. It wasn’t about them – it was about Jesus – it was about telling people about Jesus and inviting them into a new way of living. It wasn’t about them. It was about the boat.

Joe Rantz died in 2007 at the age of 93. Before he died, Daniel James Brown had the opportunity to interview him multiple times. This is how he describes the end of that first meeting with Joe:

I shook Joe’s hand again and told him I would like to come back and talk to him some more, and that I would like to write a book about his rowing days. Joe grasped my hand ... and said he’d like that, but then his voice broke ... and he admonished me gently, ‘But not just about me. It has to be about the boat.’⁴

It has to be about the boat. This all works when it’s about the boat.

We have an expert among us about all of this. 15-year-old Jordi McBurney-Buell is a competitive rower. She is part of an eight-person boat from the Arch City Rowing Club that qualified for the USRowing Youth National championship that will be held later this week in Sarasota, Florida. I asked her about what needs to be in place to have a strong boat. She mentioned synchronization and rapport. If one person is having a bad day, everyone is having a bad day. And, she said, you need a strong coxswain. He or she needs to know what they are doing. The rest of the boat needs to trust in that person’s leadership – trust their instincts – trust their voice.

² IBID, p. 74.

³ IBID, epigraph.

⁴ IBID, prologue, p. 3.

For us, here in the church, who is our coxswain? It's not me. It's not Ann. It's not even the session, the governing body of the church.

Our coxswain is God. I feel pretty strongly about that. It's not about you and me. It's all about God. It's all about the boat.

That's what I try to say whenever I'm given an opportunity to speak at an ordination of a new minister. I hope this is applicable not just to ministers but to anyone who is a part of a team or group trying to accomplish something together. When I am asked to give the charge at such an occasion, I say something like this:

It's not about you. Ministry – not about you. This job in this particular church – not about you.

In your time serving the church, when things aren't going well (and they will not go well), remember, it's not about you. When people get mad at you, when you drop the ball on something important, when your vision of the future of the church and their vision doesn't quite mesh. When things aren't going well (and they will not go well), remember it's not about you.

When things are going well (and they will), try to remember it's not about you. When you preach an awesome sermon, moderate a well-structured session meeting, one in which together you do meaningful work and you finish on time, when you feel that hum when your gifts mesh with the needs of the church community... when things are going well (and they will), try to remember it's not about you.

It's about the people of the church and it's about God. It's their church – and it always will be. It's the church of Jesus Christ. In every conceivable way the church belongs to God.

In other words, it's about the boat. That's what the disciples learned that first Pentecost. It's about the deep rumblings of the Spirit. It's about an intrusive, persistent God who will not let us go. It's about a world filled with people who hunger and thirst for more meaning, more community, more grace, more forgiveness, more bread, more God. It's about them. It's about God. It's about being a part of something bigger than ourselves. Is there any greater joy than being a part of something bigger than ourselves? It's about trusting God and about trusting others. It's so darn counterintuitive. We become most fully ourselves when we rely utterly on others.

Back to Joe and his teammates. They qualify to represent the United States in the 1936 Berlin Olympics, row the race of their lives and defeat the highly favored home team. This is how the book describes the experience of the race for Joe:

In the last desperate few hundred meters of the race, in the searing pain and bewildering noise of that final furious sprint, there had come a singular moment when Joe realized with startling clarity that there was nothing more he could do to win the race... Except for one thing. He could finally abandon all doubt, trust absolutely without reservation that he and the boy in front of him and the boys behind him would all do precisely what they needed to do at precisely the instant they needed to do it. He had known in that instant that there could be no hesitation, no shred of indecision. He had had no choice but to throw himself into each stroke as if he were throwing himself off of a cliff into a void, with unquestioned faith that the others would be there to save him... And he had done it. Over and over, forty-four times per minute, he had hurled himself blindly into his future, not just believing but knowing that the other boys would be there for him, all of them, moment by precious moment.⁵

When it's all about the boat, the many become one.

⁵ IBID, p. 355.