

IN THE BOAT

Philippians 1:3-5

Daniel James Brown published a book back in 2013 titled *The Boys in the Boat*. It was the story of the 1936 crew team from the University of Washington. All the members of the crew were from lower middle class homes. They had to struggle to work their way through college during the Depression years. Crew is, and was, a mostly aristocratic sport populated by upper class young men from Harvard, Princeton and other Ivy League schools. No one could ever have dreamed what an upstart, West Coast crew of lower class nobodies from Washington would do. They beat the cream of the New England schools to become the American representative in the Olympics of that year where they won the gold medal.

Brown wrote this about the sport of rowing, “Races are won by crews, and great crews are carefully balanced blends of both physical abilities and personality types... A crew composed entirely of amped-up, overly aggressive oarsmen will often degenerate into a dysfunctional brawl in a boat or exhaust itself in the first leg of a long race. Similarly, a boatload of quiet but strong introverts may never find the common core of fiery resolve that causes the boat to explode past its competitors when all seems lost. Good crews are good blends of personalities: someone to lead the charge, someone to hold something in reserve; someone to pick a fight, someone to make peace; someone to think things through, someone to charge ahead without thinking. Somehow this all must mesh. That’s the steepest challenge. Even after the right mixture is found, each man or woman in the boat must recognize his or her place in the fabric of the crew, accept it, and accept the others as they are. It is an exquisite thing when it all comes together in just the right way.”

I believe similar things are true for the church. The part of the church where the congregation sits is called the “nave”. That’s from the Latin word for “boat.” We are all in the boat. Good boat crews are blends of personalities, and it is an exquisite thing when it all comes together. A good church must also be a blend of personalities. I want to talk a little about our boat here at The Anchor today.

THANK GOD FOR BELONGING

It is not unusual to see in Paul’s letters a section where he thanks God for people and for God’s work. When he did that Paul was living by his own instruction, for he made a big deal about expressing gratitude to God. The most succinct statement of that idea was in 1 Thessalonians 5:18 where he said we should “give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” It is always God’s will for us to give thanks.

In Ephesians 5:20 Paul stated the same idea when he said we should be “always giving thanks to God the Father for everything.” Again the idea shows up in Colossians 3:17 where he said in whatever we do we should be “giving thanks to God the Father.” So as we see in this passage Paul did so as he thanked God for the Philippians, especially for how they participated in the gospel from the time he met them. He thanked God for how they responded to the

message, put their faith in Christ, and immediately wanted to do something about it. So they gave Paul all the support they could, including financial support.

This was significant because Philippi was a Macedonian city. The Philippians were some of the people Paul referred to in 2 Corinthians 8:1-2 when he wrote, “We want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. In the midst of a very severe trial their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.” They were totally impoverished, but they wanted to give. In fact, in verse 4 Paul wrote, “...they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord’s people.” Paul thanked God for them.

Unfortunately, it is easy for us to take things for granted. It happens way too often. For instance, at our house this is the season of the Great Peach Hunt. I love summer fruit, especially peaches. I admit that I am almost obsessive about it. I love sweet juicy peaches. But this time of year when they are in season, I become nearly frantic because most of the time when I see beautiful-looking peaches in the store, we buy some, but find they are a huge disappointment. They’re not juicy at all or they don’t taste like a good peach should taste, so I roam from store to store trying to find good peaches, usually with poor results. I drive Laurie nuts. I bemoan our fate. In California where the peaches are grown, why can’t we get good peaches? Laurie got so tired of my obsession she bought a peach tree so we could grow our own. I share this because I take for granted that I can walk into a grocery store every single day and buy almost any food item I can imagine, including good peaches. There’s a vast array of produce, baked goods, meats, packaged goods of every variety in the store. What if that were not available to me? What if I had to obtain food by my own efforts? Here’s what that would mean: Laurie and I would starve. Our peach tree this year produced exactly zero peaches. My point is that every time I walk into a grocery store I should fall on my knees and in tears give thanks to God that there is food available, all the food I need, even if the peaches are not up to my high standards. But I confess, I never do that. I don’t even give it a single thought. I just take it for granted that I can find the food I need there. Instead I grouse about the disappointing peaches.

God gives us so much, and often we act as though it is nothing. Paul made sure he did what he said we ought to do, and that was to be thankful and to express thanks to God for the blessings in his life. In this case, the blessing was some amazing people in Philippi.

It is important that we thank God for the blessings he has given us. One of those blessings is people. We should always thank God for the people that he has given us in the body of Christ. In other words, we should thank God for the people in our church. They are a huge blessing.

Lee Eclov is a pastor back in Illinois. He grew up in a small town in South Dakota. As you know, the weather in South Dakota can be rather less than tropical in the winter. As in it gets bitterly cold. But the real danger was blizzards. They could form quickly, and when one blew in, it made the local roads hazardous in the extreme. Rather than chance sending kids home to

outlying farms in busses during a blizzard, the school in his home town set up a system where each farm kid was assigned to a family in town. In case of severe weather the child would be taken to that family's home to stay until the threat was over. Farm families knew that their child would be safe and warm and would be fed. The kids called those homes in town "storm homes." Eclov noted that when he was back in his home town on a recent visit an old friend mentioned that the Eclov family's home had been his storm home when they were young. Eclov uses that as an analogy for the church. This is the storm home for all of us as we face the severe weather of this world. It is essential to have a storm home.

Ten years ago the *Journal of American College Health* published a study of 247 college students to see how belonging to a group impacted their physical health. The conclusion of the study was "...a sense of connection to a group of others is a key support component for the physical health of college students." It's not just students whose health is impacted by whether they have a sense of belonging to a group. Studies consistently show we all need that. In other words, our lack of a "storm home" negatively impacts our physical health. Dr. Kenneth Pelletier of the Stanford Center for Research and Disease Prevention wrote, "a sense of belonging appears to be a basic human need – as basic as the need for food and shelter." How well are you going to do without food and shelter? That's how well we all do without a sense of belonging to others.

It is obvious that spiritual health requires belonging to others. The New Testament frequently uses the analogy of a body to depict the church. It tells us we are members of one body, belonging to each other. I recall a time when Laurie and I were in the waiting room of the emergency room at the hospital a couple of years ago. I can hardly believe that our son might want to go into emergency medicine. I couldn't wait to get out of the ER waiting room because of some of the unpleasant scenes we encountered there. At one point a man came in holding his hand up by his head. I just glanced at him and saw only a glimpse of some sort of bandage and some blood, so I thought maybe he had cut his head. I was wrong. I could hear some of his conversation with the nurse at the admitting desk. I heard her say, "Well is the finger still attached?" So my question is, if that man's finger was not attached, how do you think it fared? We all know it would die, and it would do so in short order. In order to survive and thrive, a body part has to be vitally and tightly attached to the body. And that's exactly the case with spiritual body parts.

Do you think God was serious about us being part of a body? I do. That means if we are not attached, if we do not belong to a group of Christians, spiritually we are dying just as a part of our physical body starts dying when it is detached from the body. I know Christians who think they don't need the church. Here's what I can guarantee about them: they are spiritually shriveling. My point here is for us to thrive, we absolutely need each other in the body of Christ.

We need people to encourage us. We need people to support us when we are hurting. We need people to share our burdens, our fears, our doubts. We need people to pray for us and with us.

We need them to tell us the truth when we are wandering into illusions. We need people to remind us of God's truth and his goodness to us. We need people to rejoice with us when we experience blessing and joy, for it multiplies our joy immeasurably. To be alive in spirit we need to be able to minister to others, to encourage them, strengthen them, pray for them, care for them and share their burdens.

That last point is so important. Our natural bent is to be consumed with ourselves. Our default is to think continually about ourselves and to evaluate everything on the basis of “What do I get out of it?” Jesus said that when we do that we lose our souls. In other words, that is the path to spiritual death. To be spiritually alive, which is to experience knowing God, to have his peace, his joy and his love, to have the fullest life that Jesus came to give us, we need to deny self and serve other people. Being part of a body in which we stop thinking only of self and seek to care about and serve others is essential to spiritual life. Without that our souls collapse in on themselves and become spiritual black holes. ***We need to serve and minister to others in order to be spiritually vital.*** It is just like what the experts tell us about our bodies. They need to exercise to be healthy.

Where would we be without a place to belong? Where would we be without our brothers and sisters in Christ? How lonely that would be and how much less vital we would be as followers of Jesus. So first, we should give thanks to God as we remember these people who are our brothers and sisters. Laurie and I are trying to put together an album of pictures from Carissa and Michael's wedding and reception. It reminded me of all that you have all shared with us in the past five years. Both of our kids have gotten married, Michael survived a deployment to Afghanistan, Carissa and Michael moved to a foreign country called Mississippi, Toby got accepted to medical school and made it through his first year, and Anna and Toby are now expecting their first child. You have all been there to rejoice with us, to pray for and with us. It makes a huge difference!

Unfortunately, we humans have a tendency to go on the spiritual equivalent of the Great Peach Hunt. We want brothers and sisters who are the relational equivalent of sweet and juicy. Instead we find all too often that these people God has put in our path are not up to our high standards. Disappointed in them, we go looking for another group more to our liking. In other words, it's all about serving ourselves. What we need to do is appreciate them, suspect that maybe with all their curiosities God has brought them into our lives for a reason, so we should give thanks for them and serve them.

I see in this church people who love Jesus. You know the good news of his grace and you stand firm in it. You are not compromising the truth of God, but you are not belligerent like some religious people are. Time and time again I hear of you that you have met the need of a brother or sister in Christ; that you have cared for them and provided for them with no fanfare at all. I thank God for you and for the example of faith and love I see in you all. I thank God that I have you as my friends and family.

THANK GOD FOR HIS WORK

Psalm 77:11-12 says, “I will remember the deeds of the Lord; yes I will remember your miracles of long ago. I will consider all your works and meditate on all your mighty deeds.” Psalm 105:1 commands us to “Give praise to the Lord, proclaim his name.” Then in verse 5 we are instructed, “Remember the wonders he has done.” We are told it is important for us to remember what God has done. In fact, Psalm 106:7 says that the ancestors of Hebrews had a big problem, and it was that “They gave no thought to your miracles, they did not remember your many kindnesses.”

We tend to be very, “What have you done for me lately?” kind of people. Our focus can easily get too narrow as we care only about whatever we might be experiencing today. In other words, we forget. We forget what God has done for us, and the result will inevitably be that we begin to question his love and his faithfulness. This is why, as Israel was about to enter the Promised Land, Moses warned them in Deuteronomy 4:9 - “Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them fade from your heart as long as you live.” ***Don't let them fade from your heart as long as you live.*** That is a crucial command.

God created the nation of Israel beginning with Abraham. He saved them through Joseph, which is how they ended up in Egypt. He later used Moses to lead them out of Egypt, but did so through miracles. He parted the Red Sea to save them. He gave them his covenant and Law on Mount Sinai. He fed them with manna in the wilderness. He protected them; he enabled them to defeat their enemies and gain possession of the Land.

Israel, unfortunately, tended to forget. Do you remember what happened when they forgot? After Moses led them out of Egypt they headed out into a wilderness area. Do you remember what happened? There was no food there and they began to complain. Exodus 16:3 says they whined to Moses, “You have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.” Oh, right. That makes all kinds of sense. God brought all those plagues on Egypt, culminating in the Passover where all the firstborn children in Egypt died, then he parted the Red Sea so Israel could walk through it, then he had it collapse on the oncoming Egyptian army to destroy them, all as part of an elaborate ruse to lure the Israelis out into the wilderness so he could starve them to death. That’s totally reasonable, right? What happened there? They forgot. They forgot all that God had done for them, and when they forgot they concluded that God was not to be trusted. That is what always happens when we forget. We quit trusting God, even accuse him of being unfaithful. In later generations Israel would forget what God did for them, so they looked to other supposed gods to provide for them and when an enemy threatened instead of trusting God they tried to set up alliances with other nations for protection, and it always backfired.

When we don’t remember what God has done we start to think it is up to us to provide for and protect ourselves. We quit believing that God can be trusted. We can even become rebellious because we are sure he has been unfair and unfaithful to us. So remembering what God has

done for us is absolutely critical to walking with God. Read the Psalms and look for how often the psalmists recounted what God has done. That is because we easily forget, and when we forget bad things happen.

We need to remember what God has done for us in our church. We must always start with the fundamental truth that God sent his Son into this world to save us and give us eternal life. If God did nothing else for us, we should give thanks to him forever for that one act. It has given us forgiveness and hope that we could never have had.

There are countless other manifestations of God's grace and provision that we should thank him for, but today I want to think about how he has been good to us here in our church. I wouldn't say what we have seen is miraculous, but it is encouraging to see how God has provided for us in a quiet and continuous way. Of course I would begin the recounting of God's faithfulness with how the church began. Laurie and I still marvel at how the Spirit of Christ moved people to come together to bring this church into being. It was not something we could have done.

The immediate problem we faced was where would we meet? But on the very day that the idea of this church was proposed, Julie Timm told me that the chapel at Santa Fe Christian School was not being used on Sundays for the first time in more than 10 years. The next day I met with an administrator from SFC and within a couple of days we had a place to meet.

Time and time again, when we ran into a problem of who would lead various ministries, and I started to be concerned about what we would do, God provided. When Shirley Phelps stepped out of leading our children's ministry, Nicole Sales-Cunha was there to pick up the baton. But then Nicole and her family had to move out of the area. What would we do? Toby had been dating Anna, and was engaged to her, and she had been working in the children's ministry. Anna took over that responsibility. Then Micah needed to step out of the youth ministry. Nate and Melissa Smith just happened to be coming to the church, and Nate had experience as a youth pastor. Nate took on that responsibility, and later, when Anna needed to step out of the children's role, he took that over as well. Toby had been leading worship, but when he started medical school he needed to cut back. Just at that through Rich Turner, we had contact with Dylan. He stepped into that role.

My point here is that God provided those people. We didn't go out looking for them. We didn't have to recruit them. At the time we needed them they showed up. It has been somewhat amazing to watch it happen. Every time we've hit that, "Uh oh, what are we going to do now?" stage, God has given us an answer.

We need to remember this and give thanks to God, because he has been good to us. It would be ungrateful to fail to do so. But it is also important because many of us, and I am definitely included, are good at "what if" scenarios. What if this happens or that happens, how will we survive? Here is how: we remember that God has acted to provide for us. It is he who brought

us together and has sustained us. If God wants us to exist and to continue to serve and worship him together, then we will, not because of our ability or plans, but because of his provision. And if God does not want us to continue, then neither do we want that.

THANK GOD FOR GRACE AMONG US

Over the past five years I have said on numerous occasions that the church, including this church, is to be like an outpost of heaven. The people of Philippi were proud to be Roman citizens and saw themselves as a little slice of Rome planted there in Macedonia. Paul picked up on that and said that is sort of the way we are to think of ourselves. We are to see ourselves as a little slice of heaven planted here on earth. Here people should encounter the kind of relating to each other that happens in heaven. Here they should encounter the kind of grace and peace that exists there. There is nowhere on this earth that people can find grace like that, and as for peace, people are desperate for it. We should have it in our minds that grace and peace should be found in abundance here.

This is not heaven. We are not glorified people who are just like Jesus. We are still very human, flawed people. So we will not perfectly represent heaven. Yet here people should get at least a taste of it. When I was growing up, my favorite bakery in the world was right down at the end of our street. In the morning we could often catch the delicious aroma of those doughnuts drifting up the street. Smelling the aroma was not having the doughnut, but it was pleasant and it made us want the doughnuts. I like to think of the church as the place where people can catch the aroma of God's kingdom. This is not heaven, but you can smell it here and the aroma makes you want it.

I thank God that has been and continues to be the case. We have some interesting characters here, beginning with Laurie and me. We have nearly infinite possibilities for finding fault with each other and for rubbing each other the wrong way. We have nearly infinite opportunities to disagree and to get upset with each other. We fail each other in so many ways. Yet through all of that I have consistently seen the people of this church give each other grace. You have continually chosen to love and to be at peace with imperfect people. You have exhibited the grace of God in so many ways. You have given off the aroma of heaven. That is an incredible blessing for which we must always praise and thank God.

APPLICATION

What should we do as we move forward into the future?

LIVE IN AWE OF GOD

In 2010, Alexander Tsiaras, a very smart man who has taught at both the Brown University and Yale medical schools, presented a talk at the Technology, Entertainment and Design conference that has been much viewed. In it he presented astounding photos of babies in the womb. This, of course, is of much interest to me, given that my first grandchild is now on the way. Tsiaras shared some astounding facts. For instance, between 25 and 28 days after

conception a baby's heart is developing at the rate of one million cells per second! When the baby reaches term its body will contain 60,000 miles of vessels. Tsiaras said, "The complexity of those facts, the mathematical models are beyond human comprehension...I look at this with marvel. How do the instruction sets not make mistakes as they build what is us? It's a mystery, it's magic, it's divinity...It's beyond the comprehension of any mathematics today."

What he was saying, though it seems like he was trying to avoid saying it, is this is a mysterious work of God. It is, indeed, beyond our ability to grasp. It is literally awesome. Our God is an awesome God. He is powerful, he is wise beyond our imagination, he is good, he is loving and he is full of grace. Every day of our lives we are surrounded by wonders and beauty that are the radiance of his glory and goodness. Every day of our lives we are sustained and blessed by our good God.

The thing that should most mark us is that we live in perpetual awe of God. We should live with the confidence that he is here, he is with us, he is pouring out his grace and goodness on us, blessing us in more ways than we could ever enumerate. If we live in awe of God we will give thanks and praise God. When we reflect on all that God is and all that he has done and is doing for us, we will be thankful. We will thank God continually and we will be anxious to praise him. It is the normal human reaction when someone does something outlandishly good to you. You want to thank them and you want to tell others about it.

We will live in confidence and peace. Our great and sovereign God is with us. We've seen him work in the past. We know he will bring about good for us no matter what happens. So as a result we will be at peace. Do you remember the first time you flew on a jet airliner? I was 22 years old, flying from Los Angeles to Dallas. I was excited about it. I looked forward to it and I enjoyed it. This, of course, was before TSA and before they used shoehorns to cram human beings into spaces designed for creatures the size of a toy poodle. You know back when they actually gave you food on a flight, or at least something that resembled food. Though I was excited about it I did have some moments of apprehension. The first came immediately after we took off. I felt and heard this thump and was sure we had hit something in the air. My friend sitting next to me said, "Nothing to worry about. That was just the wheels coming up." A short time later I could hear the engine noise lessen a little and experienced a sinking sensation. "Oh, no! Something's wrong. We're going down." My friend said, "No, no. They just throttled back to climb at a slower rate and save fuel." An hour into the flight suddenly the plane shuddered. I said, "We've been involved in a midair collision!" My friend said, "No, that's just turbulence. No big deal." So it went. On the flight home I was calm. Oh, there's the wheels coming up. Yeah, that's just turbulence. Oh that noise is just the flaps being extended. I knew all of that was under control, so I was at peace about it.

So it will be for us as we remember that our God is sovereign and he is present with us. We will not be shocked or thrown into fear by the things that happen or might happen. We'll be at peace because he is with us.

We will pray. The first Christians had gone through the terror of seeing Jesus executed on a cross and feared they were next. But then they saw Jesus risen from the dead. They knew nothing was as great as his power. They had confidence in him now. So they prayed. They prayed continually. They met every circumstance with prayer. When we live in awe of God we will pray, because the first thing we will want to do in any situation is talk to the one who is in control.

BE PEOPLE OF GRACE

The way we can stay unified, the way we can experience the strength and encouragement of the body of Christ, is for God's grace to rule in all our lives. It is for us to give each other the same grace God gives us.

Laurie and I received a recorded message from the water police a few weeks ago. Actually it was from our water company, but it felt like the water police. It informed us that water from our sprinkler system had been seen running off our lawn. In these drought-dominated days, this is mortal sin. They didn't delineate any specific punishment for our profligate water usage, but the threat of some horrible fate was there. It made me feel a little creepy, to be honest. One of our neighbors evidently ratted us out. Apparently this is now a thing. They're calling it drought-shaming. There are actually people making videos of people overwatering their lawns and posting them on the internet. I get the need to conserve water. But I can also tell you that my neighbor's action does not create a sense of togetherness and community in our neighborhood. It smacks of Big Brother watching. It does not endear me to whoever did that. I have my suspicions.

My point here is that there are ways that we relate to each other that draw us together and create a sense of community, and there are ways, the normal human ways, that lead to conflict, resentment, suspicion, anger and division. Our church to this point has fortunately tended to major in the grace style of relating that promotes community and oneness. In 1 Thessalonians 4:10 Paul commented that the Thessalonians loved the Christians throughout Macedonia, then he urged them, "to do so more and more." The New American Standard translation of that was to "excel still more." That's what I say to you, in loving and giving each other grace, way to go, so now excel even more.

Everywhere in the world people are striving, they're wounded, they're guilty, they know they're not measuring up, they're weary and they're burdened. They are desperate for a place where they can find grace. The world does not have it, God is overflowing with it. This is to be a place where hurting, grieving, wounded, weary people can find rest for their souls, where they can be the flawed people they are and know they will be embraced despite their worst faults.

A few years ago Laurie and I were going on vacation with our two adult kids who were still single at that time. Both the kids had a suitcase. Laurie and I shared two suitcases and we had my big hockey equipment bag in which we put all of our recreational stuff like tennis racquets,

snorkeling gear, hiking shoes and so on. I was responsible for getting all the suitcases into the car as we headed for the airport. When we checked in for our flight somehow we only had four pieces of luggage instead of five. I had messed up and forgotten one. It was the one that had all of Laurie's essential items. She was not happy. She was going to have to go on vacation without all the stuff in that bag. But she didn't berate me. And since that time she has never once mentioned my mistake. When we are going for vacation she never says something like, "Make sure you get all the bags, Rick." She gives me grace. The result of that is it makes me happy to be with her all the more. I know I can make a mistake that causes her problems and she'll still love me. Imagine if we were all like that in the church, we'd all love being together.

BE LIGHT

Jesus told us to be salt and light in this world. That's exactly what we need to do. We don't have to salt people or light them up. We are just to go into the world and be the salt and light God has made us to be. Let the light of God's grace shine. Bring his grace to every person you encounter and every situation you face.

We have what the world around us is dying for. We have the life they want. We have the hope they need. We have the grace of God which is life itself. In our community we have the thing our world wants.

One of the most common traits of humans is that when we experience something wonderful, we want to tell others about it. Our own enjoyment of the wonderful thing, even our experience of it, is enhanced by bringing others in to share in it. And that is exactly what God wants us to do. We must always be looking outward, to share the grace of God with the world around us.

REJOICE IN JESUS

Finally, walk each day with Jesus. There is often not as much joy in this world as we wish there were. Lots of things we experience in life will not be joyful, yet God wants his joy to be in us and that joy to be full. One of the marks of a Christian should be joy.

The way to do that is to live with Jesus in everything every day. Find your joy not merely in the good things of this life, but in his love for you and his presence with you.