

## IN THE NAVY

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Grace Church in New York  
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*When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” (Luke 5:4)*

Ever since I was a child I’ve been fascinated by great, ocean-going ships – aircraft carriers and classic liners being my favorites. Thus, I’ve been following with interest the news about the RMS Queen Mary, first launched in 1934. In the years leading up to World War Two the mission of the Queen Mary was to carry passengers across the North Atlantic Ocean as quickly and as comfortably as possible. Her main competition was the French liner, SS Normandie: perhaps a more visually beautiful ship, but no one complained about the Queen Mary’s majestic profile and lavish accommodations. What is more, of the two she turned out to be the faster and ultimately more popular liner during the glory days of transatlantic crossings.

When war broke out the Queen Mary was converted to a troop ship and painted grey. She became known as “the Grey Ghost” because enemy ships could not match her speed. In one crossing alone she carried over 15,000 soldiers, and thanks to many such voyages hastened the day of peace in Europe. After the war the liner’s comfortable appointments were restored and she returned to passenger service well into the 1960s. But the glory days of ocean liners were passing. They were enormously expensive to operate, and jet planes could now carry passengers in a fraction of the time. In 1967 the city of Long Beach, CA, bought the Queen Mary and moored her permanently in the harbor to be a floating hotel and tourist attraction. Yes, she saved her from the scrap yard, but never again would she put out into the deep waters.

The Queen Mary has now been docked in Long Beach far longer than she plied the seas. Even though immobile, the great liner’s condition is deteriorating. A recent engineering study estimated the need for \$300 million in repairs, \$23 million of which was immediately necessary to seal the hull, install pumps, and prevent the ship from capsizing. Currently the ship is closed due to the pandemic, but also to undergo \$5 million in emergency maintenance. No doubt, the Queen Mary has a glorious history, and she is still a thing of beauty. But some are wondering where the money will come from, and how much is it worth to keep the boat afloat.

In today’s reading from the Gospel of Luke we’ve heard how Jesus made use of Simon Peter’s boat. The scene occurred on the lake of Gennesaret, more commonly known as the Sea of Galilee. It was early in the public ministry of Jesus, and Luke tells us that crowds of people were pressing in to hear the word of God. The shoreline of the Sea of Galilee includes numerous coves or lagoons that form natural amphitheatres. It was near one of these where Jesus was preaching. Also nearby were Peter and some other fisherman, who were packing up after a particularly frustrating night of fishing. As you heard Luke tell it, Jesus simply climbed aboard Peter’s empty boat and asked to be put out a little way from the shore. What Jesus did was turn Peter’s boat into a pulpit, and from there he preached and taught. Then came the miraculous catch of fish. In order to illustrate in real time the surprising mysteries of God’s kingdom, Jesus challenged Peter to take the boat into deeper water and let down the nets. Peter grudgingly did so, and behold: a catch of fish so large that he had to call out the other boats with more nets to bring it all to shore.

The miraculous catch of fish is a magnificent story that encapsulates the whole mission of the church: trusting in Jesus, going forth into the deep, and catching people up into the love of God. The story contains the promise of abundance for those who put the faith in Jesus. However, I think we

overlook one detail of the story. In borrowing Peter's boat, Jesus simply took it for granted that the thing would float – that it would be a seaworthy platform from which he could deliver his message. I have an irreverent, comical image in my mind of Jesus launching a boat that he didn't know was full of holes, sitting down to deliver his sermon, and trying to get through his "three points and a poem" before having to swim to shore. Ah, you say, Jesus could walk on water, so he wouldn't have had to swim. Point well taken. But why then did Jesus bother with the boat at all? If he'd really wanted to make an impression, why not simply walk out to the middle of the cove and deliver his message while standing on the water? Who needs a boat?

Let me tell you what I think. By using the boat, I see Jesus affirming the goodness of the material world. Christianity has always been plagued by efforts to over-spiritualize the gospel. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century the Gnostics believed that matter was evil – a creation of the devil – and that spirit was good. You and I, according to Gnostic belief, are spiritual beings trapped in the evil world of matter. The goal of human life, they taught, was to have as little to do with stuff as possible, and return to the spirit realm that God inhabited. The early church countered the Gnostic heresy by affirming the creation stories in Genesis. The devil didn't make the world, God did, and God said it was good. Furthermore, God in Christ took on flesh, entered this world of matter, worked as a carpenter with wood and tools, and multiplied loaves and fish. Far from demonizing the material order, Jesus made sacred use of it. He pushed out in Peter's boat, baptized with water, and on the night before he died, he took bread and wine and said "this is my body; this is my blood." As Christians, we believe it's never spirit over substance, or spirit instead of substance. Rather, it's spirit *through* substance. God conveys grace not apart from the ordinary stuff of the earth, but through it. So let's not overlook the boat itself in the miraculous catch of fish. Jesus counted on it.

All of this brings us now to the good ship Grace Church on the day of our annual meeting. To be sure, we have a rich history of service, and we occupy a building of extraordinary beauty. But let me give you two words that you can never accurately use to describe Grace Church: water tight. We have leaks – lots and lots of leaks. Of course, leaks are to be expected in a building that's 175 years old. For the most part we chase them down and fix them. Although I should add here that both the chantry and the rectory are past the point of sending up the maintenance staff with a bucket of tar. These buildings need new roofs entirely – an expensive proposition.

How will we pay for the repairs? A number of factors are making it even more difficult than it would normally be to counter the effects of time's rude hand. We are hardly alone in having suffered through the past two years of the pandemic, but what we don't yet fully realize is the long term consequence on our congregation. We suspect we are leaking households. A number of people retreated to remote locations, and as the pandemic dragged on they established roots there and aren't returning to the city. Others have just lost the holy habit of coming to church. Our annual giving has held steady, but fewer households are bearing the burden than just a few years ago. That's a metric of concern. We need more hands on deck.

What else? The neighborhood around Grace Church continues to suffer. The number of retail establishments that did not survive the pandemic is alarming, and now empty storefronts line the streets. One of these that will go missing later this year is the paint store in 80 4<sup>th</sup> Ave, the building responsible for up to a third of our operating revenue in normal times. The expiring lease and a number of critical repairs to 80 4<sup>th</sup> are stressing the building's short term ability to support the church's mission. The church's endowment is also stressed, having been hit hard by mediated settlements of the lawsuits concerning the abusive behavior of the 1990s choirmaster, Bruce McInnes. We believe that the settlements were the right thing to do, and pray that they contribute to the healing of those whose childlike trust McInnes so disastrously betrayed. Nevertheless, it doesn't make it any easier to pay the bills.

You may be wondering where the money will come from to cover all these expenses. Stay tuned, you'll hear more about our finances later today at the annual meeting. Meanwhile, I am reminded of a one-frame cartoon that a parishioner once shared with me. It shows a beleaguered looking priest greeting the departing worshippers at the church door after the service. The people gathered around the priest are all smiles as one of them declares, "*We're glad to hear that you don't know where the money for the new roof is coming from. For a minute there we thought you were going to try to get it from us!*"

Dear People of God: Think not that I am preaching a biblically shrouded fund-raising sermon. Let's not lose sight of today's Gospel passage – the miraculous catch of fish. The bounty came from Jesus. It was not squeezed out of the people. How easy it would be to allow Peter's initial discouragement to be our stopping point. Peter had worked all night long and caught nothing. But after Jesus commandeered the boat, Peter must have listened to what Jesus had to say. Luke doesn't record the content of Jesus' words, but my guess it was about the abundance of life in the kingdom of God. It was enough to inspire Peter to persevere: *If you say so, I will let down the nets*. Peter put his faith in Jesus, and the result was a catch of fish so large that they could hardly bring it ashore.

Let's not lose sight of today's reading from First Corinthians 15 (1-11), which is St. Paul's great chapter about the resurrection of Jesus. Paul wrote to remind his readers – including you and me today – that death did not have the last word in the life of Jesus. God raised him on the third day. How easy it would be for us to conclude that the sufferings of this present time win the day. They don't, and the resurrection of Jesus is the flag planted in history to remind us that even now, God is working to bring us out of error into truth, out of sin into righteousness, out of death into life. Jesus wants to commandeer this boat for the mission of catching people into the loving purposes of God. To be a part of it – to worship in this place and among this people – is to be a passenger on a voyage to the kingdom of God. Even better, it is to be in the navy.

Not long ago I was driving in the car, ferrying one of my sons either to or from college, if memory serves. The radio was on and suddenly, over the airwaves, came the unmistakable introduction to Y.M.C.A – the biggest hit of the 1970s and 80s disco band, The Village People. I was in high school and college during the disco era. The music belongs to my generation, though I would hardly count myself an expert in the genre. So forgive me when I say that I remember the Village People having precisely three hits: Y.M.C.A., Macho Man, and let's not forget, In the Navy.

In the Navy is a catchy tune with fun lyrics that the U.S. Navy itself considered using as a recruiting tool. At one point in the song the lead singer, Victor Willis, lists all the reasons why he can't be a new recruit: he's afraid of water, he gets sea sick, what's he going to do on a submarine? Nevertheless, the singer apparently succumbs to the promise that in the navy he can sail the seven seas and put his mind at ease. Frankly, the singer reminds me a bit of Simon Peter on the shore of Lake Gennesaret, shying, away from being a follower of Jesus: *Master, we have worked all night long and caught nothing*. And a bit later: *Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!* We know that Peter, inspired by the promise of the miraculous catch, and many more signs to come, put away his excuses, became a follower of Jesus, and joined the mission to bring people into the kingdom.

The glory days of the Queen Mary are in the past. Her mission now is to tourists, not passengers. But aboard this ship we call Grace Church, we are on a voyage. We are in the navy. My prayer is that you and I, like Peter, trust in God's mighty power to save, even to the point of putting out into the deep water, and letting down our nets for a catch.