

Sermon delivered at Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA
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By
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The title of my reflection today is: *Navigating with Square Sails*. Here I am talking about sailing, and I must confess I know next to nothing about sailing. Let me show you just how easy it is for a myth to get started. Back in 1976, around the time of our nation's bicentennial, I needed some pictures to perk up my office. One of the super markets was celebrating our big national birthday by selling very inexpensive prints of the tall ships. You may have seen these or others like them. I was captivated by the majestic beauty of these old sailing vessels. I remember seeing TV footage of them sailing the Hudson River. After a trip to K-Mart, I had several 99cent frames to hang on the wall, each containing the image of a beautiful tall sailing ship. Years rolled by, and the frames and prints adorned a succession of my offices. People began to think I liked boats! Now I know there is a difference between boats and ships, but let's not mess up the flow of the story.

Over time, colleagues, family, and clients alike gave me more pictures of boats, replicas of boats, models of boats, and I even have an etching of a boat in a plastic cube. This collection continued long after the K-Mart frames fell apart and, even after the prints of the tall ships had been recycled. I still think sailing vessels, the tall ships in particular, are magnificent, and I'm not totally devoid of experience on water. As a boy scout I learned how to handle a canoe, even earning a merit badge; and I know how to feather rowboat oars to cut down on wind resistance. A friend even took me sailing once. I learned how to duck when the boom came around and to hang my butt first over one side and then the other to keep the boat upright and slicing through the water.

Recently, I was talking over lunch with a Methodist minister friend of mine, and sort of out of the blue, he asked me if I knew why biblical

people were so afraid of the sea. Of course I gave him a blank stare, which encouraged him to tell me about square sails. "Sailors of old," he said, those even before the Rime of the Ancient Mariner, were dependent on sailing with square sails." "So?" I said. "So", he replied, "you can't control the direction of your boat with a square sail; a square sail does not move to catch the direction of the wind." I began to see that sure you may have a rudder, but the wind is going to push you wherever it chooses.

Now my friend is very smart and gets this sly grin on his face, as if to say there is a deeper meaning here than wind blowing ships around. But I'm still with the ships, and I'm thinking about how everything blows to one corner of an outdoor swimming pool. All the rubber duckies, the noodles, and other toys go where the wind pushes them. My friend had to remind me that the Greek word for wind is the same as the word for spirit; it turns out that they are similar in Hebrew as well. But it is not just the word for spirit and wind. We also use the same word for breath. In Greek it is pneumas, as in pneumonia.

Ok, so lunch is over and my friend goes off to think about Greek words. And I'm left pondering square sails and toys in a pool. All of a sudden what he meant hits me: we are just as frightened as the early sea-faring sailors. We're just frightened of different things. We go through life like ships with square sails. Every time we look up there is a new storm blowing us around. Children are separated from their parents at our border; a Supreme Court justice retires; another unarmed black man is shot by police; illness and death are just around the corner, and so on. Just yesterday I read that a federal appeals court in Atlanta ruled that workers are not protected against workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation. In many ways the winds of life buffet us at will.

Overtime, shipbuilders began to understand that the wind direction could be captured through the use of different shaped sails and by pivoting the sails from side to side as the wind changed direction. So why do we continue to use the equivalent of square sails

to propel our lives? We are not only crashing into those who want to go somewhere else, we are crashing into each other. If we are all down at one end of the pool, we may have our rubber duckies, but there is no room to swim.

It seems important to remember that we are like the boats and need functional sails. We can and should design sails to give us direction as well as speed and power. These complicated times we live in call for the ability to tack with the wind, to hoist sails and trim them at need, and to stop using ramming tactics on our fellow human beings.

I know people whose square sails come straight out of Fox News; but in all honesty, I have my own square sail that comes straight out of MSNBC. I love it when Rachel Maddow scores a political point and skewers an unsuspecting right-winger. By then I'm so worked up I'm not using any sail; I've lost sight of the grace of sailing all together. I'm beating a cadence drum on a man of war with a ramming bow. I want my side to win, and I've lost sight of the fact that not only are those skewered right wingers human beings, they are my neighbors. How could I?

One of my hobbies is reading science fiction. A lot of science fiction takes place in a dystopian future after humanity has done a number on itself. War is a common scenario: we might destroy civilization through nuclear, chemical or biological warfare or, just through plain stupidity by poisoning our environment and filling our oceans with plastic. Each scenario represents using a square sail. In each case we have lost the ability to maneuver. Human beings have pushed the need to be in control, to have it our selfish way. We are close to creating our own extinction.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus tells his followers that there is something more important than accumulating wealth and power. He says it in a way that they can understand. What could be more terrifying to a coastal people than the wind? So Jesus makes his point that a different kind of wind is needed, the wind of the spirit. It is so important that Jesus speaks of it as our needing to be born anew. To

not be stuck in old narrow ways. This means to see life in a spiritual or value laden manner rather than as a conflict to win or lose. If we have square sails, half of us are going to be blown to the left end of the pool and half of us will be blown to the right end or, more likely, come crashing against one another. Jesus knew about the fear of the sea. He also knew the relationship among these three words in the language of his time: spiritual life offers freedom from pettiness and greed; it offers an inner life as powerful as the wind and as alive as breathing. Jesus wanted his followers to learn to navigate rather than to run adrift.

If the concepts of wind and spirit and breath have overlapping meaning in Greek and Hebrew, then we may need to extend our metaphor to consider that we are dealing with our very lives. A spiritual attitude is not an attitude of other worldly concern. A spiritual attitude is one about here and now that does more than repeat the phrase of our First Principle “the inherent worth and dignity of everyone”. We need to learn to radically extend compassion even to our enemies, while standing up to what we know is wrong.

In the mid-1930s as Hitler was coming to power, a young German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, wrote a book titled, *The Cost of Discipleship*. Bonhoeffer’s concern was that the Lutheran Church of his time had taken to heart Luther’s contention that one was saved by faith alone; Bonhoeffer called it “cheap grace,” if one just took it and did not pass it on to others through compassionate action. After he had been imprisoned by the Nazis, Bonhoeffer chose to minister not just to his fellow prisoners, but also to the guards and prison officials who held him captive. Even though he was involved in a plot to kill Hitler, he knew that divine love was for everyone. Bonhoeffer was a triangular sail filled with a compassionate spirit.

In the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the sailor shot the albatross because it ate their food and gave nothing back. It irritated him; his shipmates thought at first that killing the albatross was a clever thing to do. As punishment for such a capricious act, the fates, or God, caused the weather to alternately founder or batter the ship. All the sailors

were complicit because their attitude about killing the albatross followed changes in the weather rather than having compassion for the bird. Whatever shaped sails the ship actually had did not matter; it was the shape of the sailors' inner sails that determined Coleridge's story.

Cable news does not just report the weather, it attempts to make it. Fake news or anti-fake news wants to blow our attitudes toward one end of the pool or the other. Do our sails allow us to set a course that is both true and compassionate? Do we use an inner compass that lets us know when we are off course? It's easy to grab the wind, but it's hard to remember that everyone deserves to sail under the bluest sky.

Blessed be!

Good Words for Going Forth (from Dietrich Bonhoeffer):

"We come to a clearer and more sober estimate of our own limitations and responsibilities, and that makes it possible for us genuinely to love our neighbors. So long as we are suffering from an exaggerated sense of our own importance we can never really love our neighbors:..." *Letters and Papers from Prison*