

The Back of the Boat
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz
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Regina Brett, a columnist for the Cleveland Plain Dealer, wrote a book that I've referred to before entitled *God Never Blinks: 50 Lessons for Life's Little Detours* which has become one of my favorite books over the years. The fourth chapter of the book is simply, "Don't Take Yourself So Seriously. No One Else Does." And she talks about submitting a lengthy story for a magazine containing one mistake and beating herself up for not being perfect after she discovers her error. Brett had spent weeks working on this article, had interviewed many people, and rewrote it too many times to count to make sure that it was flawless. But then she got a phone call. One of the subjects in the article thanked her for the feature, but noted that she spelled his name wrong.

She recounts, "I buried my face in my hands and wept at my desk. The story was more than 3,000 words long. I had spelled one single word incorrectly but I gave myself an F. When a coworker in the newsroom saw my tears, she rushed over, 'Are you okay? What happened?' she asked, worried that someone had died." Brett gasped between sobs that she spelled a name incorrectly in the article, and the coworker stared at her in a rather dumbfounded way and just walked away. It was right then that Brett told herself that maybe she needed to lighten up a little bit.[1]

I once made a fairly big mistake at my former church and I can relate to what happened here with this misspelling of a name. My former church in Wellesley Hills is a large congregation, about 1,000 members and so it was incredibly difficult to keep track of everyone, especially when it came to pastoral care situations. On one Sunday I was giving the pastoral prayer and one of my colleagues gave me a last minute prayer request, to pray for a member whose mother had just been diagnosed with cancer. Yet somehow I didn't hear the word "mother" in his sentence so I announced to the entire congregation that the woman herself was diagnosed with cancer and that we needed to pray for her. There was a collective gasp from the congregation that I took to be concern, and I went on with my prayer.

After I was finished, the senior minister got up before the offering to correct my mistake, and I was absolutely mortified. During coffee hour, I went up to this parishioner and apologized profusely. I was almost in tears myself because I was so embarrassed and felt horrible that I messed up this prayer request for her mother and sent the church into a bit of a panic that one of their members, and a beloved member at that, might be sick. She loving and graciously said that she got more attention in church than she had in a long time and now everyone would be sure to pray for her mom, and all was well, not to worry, we all make mistakes. What both of these instances highlight is that no one can be perfect and that we just shouldn't take ourselves so seriously. Whether it was Regina Brett having a meltdown over her one mistake in the column or me freaking out about mistakenly botching a prayer request—life went on, we were forgiven, and the world didn't come to a screeching halt because we happened to make a mistake.

As Brett says in another part of her book, and I have this quote taped to my desk, "Frame every so-called disaster with these words: in five years, will this matter?"[2] Sometimes the answer is yes, but more often than not, it's no—your crisis, disaster, mistake, really won't matter in five years.

What we really see in today's scripture from the Gospel of Mark is exactly this call to not take ourselves so seriously all the time. When we read this passage we may get hung up on the

miracle story contained within, could Jesus really say to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" and it could happen?[3] Or we can look a little closer at the story itself to see how Mark sets the scene for us.

Jesus leaves the crowds behind for awhile to get some space. He tells the disciples in the evening; let's go across to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. But then a storm kicks up and the disciples are terrified. Now to be fair, this seems like a pretty bad storm and the Sea of Galilee is known for "sudden, violent storms with damaging winds." [4] What's so telling and actually rather comical though, is that during most of this encounter, Jesus is "in the stern, asleep on the cushion." [5] The disciples, some of whom are fishermen and professionally sail these seas, are running around, scared to death, yelling at Jesus, "Don't you care that the ship is sinking and we're all going to drown?" [6]

And Jesus is just passed out on this cushion sleeping away. When he gets up and stills the storm, his words are, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" [7] I've said it before, for Mark fear is the opposite of faith, so the implication is that the disciples need to get a whole lot more faith if they're going to conquer all their fears and doubts.

But I think that we should take this a step further in our modern context. I really think that the implication is also don't take yourself so seriously! Calm down. It's going to be okay. Take a deep breath. I'm here for you. Relax.

Anne Lamott, the fantastic writer, tells a story about having a meltdown when she discovered a mole on her ribs. Her father died of malignant melanoma, so she was justified in her fear, but she found the prospect of having it tested absolutely terrifying and couldn't concentrate on anything else. She says that she decided to write God a note on a scrap of paper. She wrote, "I am a little anxious. Help me remember that you are with me even now. I am going to take my sticky fingers off the control panel until I hear from you." [8]

The mole ended up being benign and just irregularly shaped—though Lamott says that the two best prayers she knows are, "Thank you, thank you, thank you" and "Help me, help me, help me." She used both of these prayers to address God in this incident, and often finds these simple prayers to be the most fitting in her life. When the storm was rocking the boat on the Sea of Galilee, the disciples' call to Jesus was certainly, "Help me, help me, help me!" And he does help them, he does address their concern, but he also calls their panic and anxiety into question a little bit.

Now, having been accused by minister friends of not being great with self-care, I was gifted a book written by a professor at Andover Newton about self-care strategies for ministers. Thanks for the hint. But anyway, this story of Jesus stilling the storm is the main biblical example that Professor Kirk Jones uses in his book to tell ministers that sometimes we just need to stop and rest.

This doesn't just apply to ministers, obviously, but here's what he says, "We cannot be certain of all that Jesus did while he was in the back of the boat, but we do know there were some things that he did not do. Since he was the only one back there, we know that he did not preach to anyone, he did not teach anyone, and he did not heal anyone . . . 'the back of the boat' is a metaphor, a symbol of the necessary break from the activism of life, in general, and the rigor of the ministry, in particular." [9]

Translation: if you want to be a productive, happy, relatively sane and balanced person, who can enjoy and appreciate life, you need to lighten up a little bit and get in the back of the boat. I have to tell this to myself all the time, and I'm probably not the only one in this sanctuary who

needs to hear this message about changing our attitudes and our perspectives and resting every now and then.

The timing of this sermon is intentional by the way, because this is the last Sunday of regular worship before we move into Pilgrim Hall for the summer. And I have to say, I enjoy summers at Pilgrim. I like that for those of us who are around most of the time, we can drop in and out, that people return from vacations all tan or sunburned in my case, but happy nonetheless, telling us about their travels. And then we may have our turn to do that too.

I like that we get to hear from one another about our faiths and some of the things we may struggle within our lives when we preach. I like that I don't have to preach every Sunday and can just sit back and enjoy worship in a different way, not worrying about messing up a pastoral prayer request. I like that we can be a little laid back and casual, experiencing worship in a new way. For me, it's a chance for all of us to get to the back of the boat and relax.

As Kirk Jones so rightly states, "What matters in the back of the boat is that delight is found, not in what we produce, but in what we can, if only for a moment, open ourselves to receiving unconditionally."^[10] So here's hoping that this summer will be a transformative one for all of us, that we'll have the chance to bask in the unconditional love of God who is just a hastily said "Help me, help me, help me" prayer away. Here's hoping we can take some time to rest, not take ourselves so seriously all the time, and just be for awhile. I pray that you have a blessed summer just in case we won't see much of each other in July and August, and may we always remember that the comforting presence of God will be with us wherever we go. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Regina Brett, *God Never Blinks: 50 Lessons for Life's Little Detours*, 20.

[2] Brett, *God Never Blinks*, 119.

[3] Mark 4:39, 41.

[4] Emily Akin, "God is With Us," *Commentary on Mark 4:35-41 in Disciplines: A Book of Daily Devotions* (2012), 186.

[5] Mark 4:38.

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] Mark 4:40

[8] Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, 180.

[9] Kirk Byron Jones, *Rest in the Storm: Self-Care Strategies for Clergy and Other Caregivers*, 26.

[10] Kirk Byron Jones, *Rest in the Storm*, 37.