

A Pontoon Story. Pastor Fritz Wiese. 23 June 2024

Song at some point: "With Jesus in my boat, I can smile at the storm . . ."

Start sing: "Just sit right back and you'll hear a tale. A tale of a fateful trip. That started from a Michigan port, aboard a tiny ship." (or should I say pontoon?). Do you remember the name of that theme song? Right, Gilligan's Island. Growing up in Chicago, I'd come home after school, pour myself a bowl of Rice Krispies and turn on the TV to watch a re-run of Gilligan's Island before starting my homework.

Instead of Gilligan's story, let me today share you the story of the Pontoon at the Wiese Family Reunion, many years ago on Lake Mitchell in Cadillac, Michigan (which is right about your ring on the back of your hand).

My dad had four older sisters, and I thought each had cool names: Lorraine, Doris, Eunice and Arletha. Aunt Arletha married Uncle Floyd, so I thought they were the couple with the coolest names ever. Well, you know how family reunions go. Cards, games, playing in the water. And one morning, my Uncle Floyd made an exciting announcement. He was taking out their new-used pontoon just purchased. (In case you don't know what a pontoon looks like, it's a large flat rectangle buoyed by two long metal tubes, or pontoons. On the back you have an outboard motor with a gas tank, and on top of the platform, you have a bunch of seats.)

So, after lunch, a BUNCH of family show up on the dock for the pontoon ride. Uncle Floyd had not devised a ticket or reservation system. Yes, the number of eager participants surely exceeded recommended maximum capacity. But ah, what could it hurt? A lot of the aunts and uncles, along with the older cousins took their seats. Some of us, the younger cousins (I guess I was in 7th or 8th grade at the time) sat on the bow and squeezed in where we could. Well, Uncle Floyd cast off the line and started the engine up, when a couple of latecomers ran down the dock. "Please can't we come?" "Well, all right" acquiesced Uncle Floyd and they jumped on too.

Man were we having fun. Yes, it was a little bit cloudy, but nothing wrong with getting a break from the hot sun every once in a while. (Can you see where this story is going? 😊) As we headed across Lake Mitchell, toward an ice cream shop on the other side, the wind started to pick up and so did the waves. As the disciples could sing in the boat with Jesus on Galilee in the gospel story and as they sing in the Gilligan's Island song,

“the weather started getting rough!” A wave here, a wave there. A whitecap here, a white cap there. And I remember when the first wave crashed over the bow of the pontoon and all those cousins got wet. With the second wave that crashed up front, everyone started to push to the back. But of course, a see-saw motion took effect. So, the stern of the boat careened down, with waves washing over the rear. I remember the orange gas tank, positioned on the back of the boat, starting to float away, large waves having swept it off. Thank goodness one of the cousins could pull it back via the black gas line, still affixed.

The situation escalated to the next level of chaos when I hear one of my aunts and then another and then an older cousin shout that they don't know how to swim. What? And yes, Uncle Floyd has a couple of life preservers, but we clearly don't have enough for everybody. Someone called out for prayer. And we did have a group family prayer. Well, Uncle Floyd, once he got the gas tank back on board, headed with the wind to the closest shoreline. And when we were about 200 yards out or so—what felt like still sort of far, but close enough--some of us who felt that we were among the stronger swimmers jumped out of the boat to lighten the load. Eventually, everyone made it to shore safely. No Wieses perished that day. How we got home and all the tales to be told are the stuff of Wiese family legend these days.

So, this family pontoon story, along with our gospel's similar story of a storm on the sea, has inspired a few faith insights:

1. **It's a crazy thing when life feels unbalanced.** When we saw the waves break on the bow of the pontoon, we ran to the back with such fear, but realized we might have over-compensated. It's not good to see your gas tank floating away. When isolation was required in the Covid years, we realized the mental health price of TOO much alone time. Maybe we're STILL unbalanced with folks spending so much time on social media and still not plugging into church and other large interactive groups the way we used to. Families can feel unbalanced—running around, trying to help the kids thrive with a ton of sporting and arts camps but also chill time and the unstructured freedom to figure out one's unique identity. Weather craziness, adjusting to new seasons of life—indeed, we can all cite occasions of struggle when our boats are so unbalanced. What in your life right now feels unbalanced?

2. **#2. Pay attention to the reality that those around you might be experiencing the storm differently than you.** For some of the young cousins, the Michigan storm was scary, but akin to a white-water rafting trip when you get tossed out of the boat, knowing that you're gonna be OK in the end. But for my Aunt Doris, who couldn't swim, she was terrified! My dad told me years later that Aunt Doris had nightmares about that experience, genuinely wondering amid the storm if that day would be her last.

The horrified disciples couldn't believe that Jesus had the nerve to be napping through the white caps crashing their boat. "Do you not care that we are about to die?" they shouted! When you go through life's storms, as you negotiate your own feelings, are you also paying attention—in love—to those around you? Who might have it even worse than you? Who might need a little extra support and care? It's so cool that together as a faith community, we DO try to share caring ministries with one another in the midst of life storms and send money and food to neighbors far and wide trying to stay afloat. We DO try to prepare our children for a variety of weather situations they'll face in life. Storm support is a great way of obeying Jesus command to love our neighbors.

3. Which leads me to #3. There's only one boat. And we're all in the same boat together. Sometimes, fool ourselves a bit, right? "I've worked hard to get my boat or yacht all settled. Good luck to guys over there." And I get it; we are responsible for our own households and congregations. But frequently, we're blind to the big picture reality that we're all in this together. On the raging Galilee, it didn't matter where Peter or Judas, Simon or Andrew were sitting. ONE boat. With my cousins, it didn't matter bow or stern; there was ONE pontoon facing the same storm. A recent survey indicated that more Protestant Americans believe in human-induced climate change than ever before. Or at minimum, when every year becomes the hottest on record, you know something's going on. We've got one planet. We're realizing that what some of us do over here DOES affect others over there. Same planet, same destiny.

Memorial Day was a few weeks ago, when we remembered those who gave their lives for the love of their country. I've never heard soldiers say in retrospect, "I went to fight for the security of just the white Americans or tan Americans or black Americans. I went to fight for just the poor Americans or rich Americans, those living on the East coast or West Coast alone." They went bravely for the whole country, the one country. We live on one planet; there is one pontoon.

4. And that brings us to the last and most important point: Jesus is with us in the boat in the storm. Now, it's wise to get up every morning and say, "Jesus, I invite you to do life WITH me today. Come with me, will you please?" But even if Jesus is NOT on your invite list, he's with you! Jesus promised in Matthew: I'm with you wherever you go. In Romans: there is nothing that can separate us from God's love in Jesus. Not even the worst storms. Whether or not you're faithful enough to invite him.

Yes, like our gospel today, sometimes it SEEMS that Jesus is SLEEPING in the boat. Like you, when I get to heaven I've got a lot of questions for Jesus. There have been too many storms and situations I don't understand. BUT, our faith celebrates the incredible news that Jesus is with us in the sunshine and storm alike. And Jesus will, in his timing, get us home safely, back on shore. As he did with his first disciples, as he did with my family in Michigan, and as he WILL do with each and every one of us.

In Jesus' name, Amen.