

FLOAT, SWIM, OR SAIL

A Sermon by The Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on the Fifth Sunday of Pentecost, July 9, 2017

Lectionary Reading: Galatians 5:22-23.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

What's the Right Direction; to Be or Not to Be, That Is the Question

An interesting book was published a few years ago with the title *Letters of Note: Correspondence Deserving of a Wider Audience*. What you might imagine from the title is that it's letters collected by an editor of letters that are genuinely deserving of a wider audience — profound letters from famous people. One of them is from a young man who asked for life advice: "What's the right direction to go in my life?" he queried. He asked the advice of Hunter Thompson of gonzo journalism fame — not the kind of person you might expect to respond to such a letter.

In any case, here's how Hunter replied:

"To give advice to a man who asks what to do with his life implies something very close to egomania. To presume to point a man to the right and ultimate goal — to point with a trembling finger in the RIGHT direction is something only a fool would take upon himself."

Nevertheless, being a fool, the author answered the letter, and he leaned on Shakespeare for some of the advice that he gave to this young man. He quotes:

"To be, or not to be: that is the question:

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to
suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous
fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles"

And then Hunter continues:

". . . And indeed, that IS the question: whether to float with the tide, or to swim for a goal. It is a choice we must all make consciously or unconsciously. So few people understand this! Think of any decision that you've ever made which had a bearing on your future: I may be wrong, but I don't see how it could have been anything but a choice however indirect — between the two things I've mentioned: the floating or the swimming."

And so he quoted Shakespeare as an anchor for the advice that he gives. It comes from *Hamlet*, Act III, Scene I, in what is called the Nunnery Scene:

"To be, or not to be: that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to
suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous
fortune,

Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them? To die:
to sleep;
No more; and by a sleep to say we
end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural
shocks
That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to
sleep;
To sleep: perchance to dream: ay,
there's the rub"

Do You Float Along, or Do You Swim for a Goal?

Here's a dichotomy presented by both Thompson and Shakespeare: In Thompson's language, do you float along to an unknown shore or do you swim to reach your destination? One of them is deterministic, a Type A personality. You set a goal, and you go for it. That's the swimmer. Or you can just sort of go with the flow, follow the tide and be a floater. I have been a swimmer for most of my life. I have set goals; I have achieved a number of them. Not all of them, but basically I have been more of a Type A personality, going for things and trying to achieve them.

However, I also have had a bit of an unnatural fascination with the floaters. When I was working on my doctorate in San Francisco, I made several trips to Haight-Ashbury, the epicenter of Hippie culture, just to watch the Hippies there and to get a feeling for Hippie culture. The notion of going down to the beach, smoking a joint, and grabbing your board and catching a wave. I have to admit, the casual freedom of that sort of life is sort of tempting.

Many of you also know that the theme song of my life is Otis Redding's "Sittin on the Dock of the Bay," a great song. Except the reason I like the song so much is because I haven't spent much time sitting on any dock in my life.

So I'm a swimmer. Others are floaters. But is there a third way? Yes, there is, and it's a better way, but first there is an articulation of the problem. Here's a quote from a spiritual teacher, and I'll tell you who it is in just a minute. It's a difficult quote to follow just by listening, and I'll do my best to say it in a that you'll get it. He says:

"All negativity is caused by an accumulation of psychological time and denial of the present."

This is a deep thought, and then he has two lists:

"Unease, anxiety, tension, stress, worry — all forms of fear — are caused by too much future, and not enough presence. Guilt, regret, resentment, grievances, sadness, bitterness, and all forms of nonforgiveness are caused by too much past, and not enough presence."

As you might have guessed, the teacher who said that was Eckhart Tolle.

Tracking a Line; Let the Waves Come and Go; Hold your Course

I have a story that illustrates the idea of floating and swimming: I once had a friend — he has passed now — whose father was very rich. The father bought and sold companies largely the way in which you and I might sell cars. It's like every couple years, let's get a new company. He owned a beautiful peninsula on Chesapeake Bay, and he had a 42-foot

Benneteau sailboat, a sloop with one big sail and another smaller sail. If you're not familiar with sailing brands, a 42-foot sailboat is a very good one.

And so my friend, his son, was the more experienced sailor, and he invited a number of his friends for a three-day sail. Crash at the dad's house, and goes out on the Chesapeake for three days, a once-in-a-lifetime experience for middle-class me. Sure enough, on the second day, it was my turn at the wheel. It was a lesson in navigation, in tracking your line, in course corrections. How to keep your line despite the waves.

At the time I was at the wheel, we had about six-foot seas, which are significant for a 42-foot boat. What I noticed was that we were tracking a line about 45 degrees or so to the direction of the waves. I set my goal off in the distance, heading that way because my friend told me to follow that course. With each wave, the boat would go slightly to my left as the wave came against the bow on my right and then as the wave receded toward the stern, it would force the boat to track a little bit to the right. Each wave sent us a little bit to the left as it struck the bow from the right and a little bit to the right as it pushed against the stern. A little bit to the left a little bit to the right.

Being amateurish, not really knowing what I was doing, every time the wave hit the bow from the right, I steered the boat to the right in an effort to counter the boat's tendency to drift to the left. And then as the wave receded to push on the stern, the boat naturally headed toward its right. But then I just pulled the boat to steer to the left, so now I went too much that way. Now I've overcorrected and it became all a mess until my friend told me it's just like that with each wave, don't do

that. Hold your line. Let the waves come and go, and let the boat just sort of naturally go a little bit each side but follow the far line for your tracking.

What came to mind during that sail was a book I had read, one of the books that pretty much changed my life. It helped me get a feeling for how to organize my life. It was a Hunter Thompson kind of moment, when you ask, "How shall I proceed?" The book was by June Singer, Ph.D., called *Boundaries of the Soul: The Practice of Jung's Psychology*. I read that book a long time ago, but I gave it away, and so for this sermon I wasn't able to find it, and then find the illustration in it. However, I found it on line. She was being interviewed by a psychologist at the time.

Here's a portion of the interview, being conducted by a guy named Jeffrey Mishlove, Ph.D., another psychologist:

Understanding the Wind in Your Life Helps You in the Right Direction

Mishlove: "June, in your early work at the Jung Institute, you have described in *Boundaries of the Soul* how for your final examination you were asked to describe the process of individuation, which is the goal of Jungian therapy, as if you're talking to a street sweeper while you were waiting for a bus. I wonder if you could repeat that definition for us."

So the issue is whether you can you take a two-inch-thick psychology book and reduce it to just a couple sentences in small words. And she replied:]

Singer: "Yes, and that was a shocker of a question, I might add, because I had studied all the parallels of the in-

dividuation process from the alchemist down to the present day. So when this question came to me, to describe this process while you're waiting for the bus and you're talking to a street sweeper, I looked out at the Lake of Zurich, and I thought, well, it's something like being in a sailing boat on the lake and utilizing the wind, understanding that the wind is something that you don't make and you can't control.

“But you need to understand how to live your life in the same way that you understand how you would sail a boat, taking the power of the wind and going with it and allowing your own knowledge of it and your understanding of it to help you go in the direction that you need to be headed. And so in Jungian analysis you learn how to deal with your own power, or rather the power that comes through you, and live your life in such a way that it's harmonious with that power which is above and beyond and all around.”

For me that is a beautiful way to look at how we might spend our lives and organize our days because there are huge cultural forces — religious ones, scientific ones, political ones, racial ones, all sorts of huge cultural forces that affect all of us and can slam against our lives or we can utilize them as we guide our lives. As you might guess, I have been struggling to articulate what I feel is a deep idea, but I'm going to make it as practical as I can with a few examples right now:

The Virtue of Four Words: Kindness, Forgiveness, Judgment, Compassion

I'm going to give you four words — what I would consider to be virtues, four out of a few dozen possible. But here are just four. We have opportunities to exhibit and to carry out these four words multiple times every day. The words are: kindness, forgiveness, judgment, and compassion.

I'd like to suggest to you that these things are course corrections that we are given every day. We have two dozen, three dozen or so different opportunities per day to be kind or unkind in everything that we say, think, and do. We have a couple dozen opportunities to forgive, maybe not per day but per week. We have multiple opportunities per day — five dozen, six dozen, a hundred dozen — to be judgmental or not judgmental.

Every person you see presents opportunities to expand your spiritual growth in what they're wearing, how they have their hair, the kind of language they use. Everything about them faces you with many opportunities per day to be judgmental or nonjudgmental, and we have that many opportunities to be compassionate in the way we drive, in the way we conduct our business, in the phone calls we make, and the like.

The point is that we are showered by God, by the universe, by our culture with opportunities to make course corrections every day, such that we end up with lives that go where we want them to go.

One more quote; this is a short one. If you're a pickup truck kind of person, and you have a top-of-the-line Dodge pickup, and you want a diesel engine in it, chances are you will want a Cummins Diesel. There's a company in Indiana, Cummins Diesel, that makes the best diesel engines for large pickups. It's what you want. There's a guy by the name of Miller who's the chief executive officer of

the company, and he has this simple quote. For me it's important. he said:

“Mediocrity is expensive.”

And so if you produce a mediocre diesel engine, it's bad for business. If you produce a good one, the best one, it's good for business.

That same principle applies to our spiritual lives. Mediocrity is expensive. Being the best in terms of compassion, kindness, forgiveness, nonjudgmentalism — being the best, constantly improving yourself, is the way to lead our spiritual lives.

Amen.