

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

Sunday, May 22, 2022

The Rev Dr Scott Couper

“Passengers on the *Navis*”

Christian Scripture: The Epistle of Clement to James



The first thing I had to research for this morning's message was the difference between a 'boat' and a 'ship'. I remember when I was a child, if I said the word 'boat' my father, who served as an officer in the Coast Guard, would explain to me why it was a 'ship'. And then if I said 'ship', he would explain to me why it was 'boat'. No matter what I chose as the word, he would inevitably correct me and tell me it was the other. So, in loving memory of my father I will explain

why it is we are speaking about a 'ship' as a symbol of the church in this series' last message.

Perhaps one reason I could never choose correctly whether I was looking at a 'boat' or a 'ship' is because it depends on whether the craft is motorized or not. With regard to motorized craft, a 'ship' is a large vessel intended for oceangoing or at least deep-water transport, and a 'boat' is anything else. Among sailing vessels, the distinction between ships and boats is that a 'ship' is a square-rigged craft with at least three masts, and a 'boat' isn't.<sup>1</sup> Because the early apostles and church leaders of the first centuries after Christ's death did not have combustible engines, they spoke of non-motorized craft. Now, if you look at the craft on our sanctuary's World Council of Church's ecumenical flag, we see one mast, so it must be a 'boat'. However, the early Christian leaders did not imagine anything so puny as a 'boat' being a symbol for the church. Also, we know that the Latin word Clement of Rome used for a symbol of the church was *navis*, or 'ship'. *Navis* is where we get the word 'navy'. And I am sure my friend and mentor David Stinson would agree, no navy worth its salt consisted of a bunch of 'boats'. So, as the minister of Centre Congregational Church, I hereby declare that the Christian symbol on which we focus today is a 'ship'. Yet, in honor of my father, every time

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<sup>1</sup> Cecil Adams, "What's the Difference between a Boat and a Ship", *The Straight Dope*, September 30, 1988. Found at: <https://www.straightdope.com/21341930/what-s-the-difference-between-a-boat-and-a-ship>, accessed, May 22, 2022.

you hear me say the word 'ship', you may feel free to quietly say to yourself in your head, "No, Scott, the image your son, Micah, drew for us and the craft on our sanctuary's flag does not have three masts and it is therefore a 'boat'".

How amazing it is that providence has deemed it appropriate that we focus on the church as a 'ship' on the day Center Church's leadership decided to hold the Annual Spring Program Meeting. Today, we review reports, much like a ship's log, to record from where we have come. We discuss our current location, the wind direction, the temperature, the barometer. I remember as a kid thinking the reason why the church was considered a ship is because adults always seemed to discuss the weather during coffee hour - as if we were sailing somewhere! And today we also, in part, chart our church's future course moving forward. Of course, we may argue from time to time about which way is port, and which way is starboard. We may even suggest that the minister not speak so much and retire himself to the 'poop deck'. But all of that is good and well because thus far there has been no mutiny and, for sure, this crew dearly loves one another. We enjoy one another's company; we celebrate the joys of life despite encountering the tempests that occasionally afflict it.

Each week, I have promised you a little theological 'deconstruction' before I conclude with some 'construction'. The deconstruction I share with you has to do with ecclesiology, or one's understanding of the church. In Clement's

correspondence to James that AJ read for us, we note Clement has a ‘command and control’ understanding of a ship’s and therefore a church’s polity. In short, the governance structure of a church is hierarchical, top down, where the captain is ‘large and in charge’ and basically a benevolent dictator. Polity on a ship is not egalitarian; it is not a democracy. Yet, our local Congregational church, our ship sailing on the high seas of history, *is a democracy*. The minister is not ‘in charge’. He or she certainly has few, if no, means to enforce his or her will, let alone discipline members of the church. Instead, the captain of our ship, if you consider me, the minister, to be such, is actually *a servant* of the crew. Because the Congregational Church is a democracy, it is lay-led. Therefore, Lynn and Sue are the CO and the XO, the ‘commanding’ and the ‘executive’ officers, respectively. And I believe we have a wonderful CO and XO. They are loving. They are professional. They are intelligent. They are dedicated. They are role models to me. I thank God that our church has such able leaders.

And then we have the ‘head purser’! A purser is an officer of the ship who keeps the accounts. Anne Fecto has done so admirably as our purser since I have been the minister of this church. If it is not the irrational behavior of a captain, like Captain Queeg in the famous 1954 film “The Caine Mutiny”, it is the actions of a treasurer like Judas that can cause so much turmoil in a church. I thank God that Centre Church has a treasurer who is (over)qualified, competent, clear, and whose

integrity is beyond question. Anne has been an absolute superstar and has never been the source of any angst.

As July is on the horizon, I approach the fourth year of my voyage with you, the crew of the U.S.S. Center Church (although given our spelling of Centre, perhaps we I should refer to her as H.M.S. Centre Church), I look forward to some R&R (rest and relaxation) this summer. Beginning next week, we will lash our deck to other sister ships and board them as we enjoy one another's Christian fellowship. In the last week of each month (except for July at Dummerston when it will be the second to last week), we will descend into the bowels of each ship and eat in their mess halls – no doubt talking about the weather.

O.K. Friends, I need to conclude this message before it becomes too boorish with one nautical reference after another (because after that I would really go 'off the plank' and start saying things like "Hardy, me Maties', and 'Land-Ho', and 'Chips-Ohoy', and other such rubbish). I conclude this message on an architectural note. Perhaps I should have requested Bruce to co-preach with me this Sunday because churches historically have not just been symbolically seen as ships, but have been constructed to resemble them. For example, the main section of the church from where I am preaching now is called the nave.<sup>2</sup> The nave, from which we get *navis*, naval, and thus the word 'ship', is the central approach to the high

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<sup>2</sup> Ratha Doyle McGee, *Symbols: Signposts of Faith*, (Nashville, Tennessee: The Upper Room, 1962), 76-77.

altar, the main body of the church. The nave of a church goes from the entry hall to the chancel.<sup>3</sup> This portion of the church is termed the nave because in a cathedral or basilica the shape of its vaulting resembles an upside-down hull (bottom of a ship).

Friends, as we move from a time of ‘sacred worship’ to a time of ‘business worship’, I would like us all to rededicate ourselves to this vessel, this ship, Centre Congregational Church, that has sailed since 1816. It requires your time. It requires your talents. And it requires your treasure. I know that a boat is sometimes cynically considered to be “a hole in the water your throw money into” – and some of you may think that as you consider investing in our church building or in full-time ordained ministerial leadership. But I remind you, this ship, the wider church, has sailed for 2,000 years! This ship has survived the collapse of empires, plagues, and wars. This ship, our local church, for me and for you, is an institution that provides foundational social, psychological, and spiritual meaning for our lives. As I think about the church, both our ship and the entire fleet, the church universal, I recall the old MasterCard commercials that remind us of what is really important: “Roof. \$30,000. Utilities \$132,000. Replacement of fuel tanks, \$9,000. Love, acceptance, and hope: Priceless”.

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<sup>3</sup> “Nave”, *Simple English Wikipedia*, found at: <https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nave#:~:text=The%20nave%20is%20the%20central,entry%20hall%20to%20the%20chancel.>, accessed May 22, 2022.

Our church, our ship, is a treasure. Let us acknowledge and invest in it as such.

This was the word of God. And it was preached to the people of God. And the people of God responded, "Amen".