

Pastors generally base their sermons on one or more of the scripture readings designated for the day, but today I am going to ask your permission instead to do a little reminiscing, recalling a worship service 30 years ago – the first time a group of people had gathered to worship under the name “St. Barnabas Lutheran Church”.

I had arrived in Plymouth three months earlier and had begun knocking on doors in the neighborhood. I would eventually knock on over 4000 doors in two year’s time.

On October 31 we had the first meeting of the Service Committee, a group of ten people who bravely said they were willing to help get a new congregation started. You may think it strange to have a meeting on Halloween, but that was the only day my supervisor, Fred Marks, was in town, so we noted that it was also Reformation Day and therefore a perfect time to make plans for a new Lutheran congregation.

It had been difficult to find a place to hold worship services. Northwest Plymouth was the edge of “the sticks” back then and there were no schools built in the area yet. We finally managed to rent the theater at the Radisson Inn Plymouth (now the Kelly Inn) for \$100 per Sunday, but it was already booked for the Sunday before Thanksgiving, the day we wanted to hold the first worship service. So for one Sunday only we were at Greenwood Elementary School, right next door to our sister congregation, Peace Lutheran Church.

The date was a little different that year (it was Nov. 24 in 1985), but it was still the Sunday before Thanksgiving. It was a cold morning (-3°) and several inches of snow had fallen during the night. I had arranged for a brass quartet to provide a festive flourish for the occasion – all of them college friends of mine. The Service Committee was there early to set up the metal folding chairs on the gym floor and they then filled the tasks of being ushers, greeters, and coffee servers. We were ready for a big crowd.

68 people showed up. Of those 68, about 50 were either related to me or were members of Richfield Lutheran where I had served as pastor the previous four years. If you subtract the Service Committee members, you’re left with about eight people from the community who were curious enough to come to a school gymnasium on a cold, snowy morning on the Sunday before Thanksgiving. It wasn’t what you would call an impressive start, at least numbers-wise.

There is only one “first sermon” in any congregation’s history, so I felt a little more pressure than usual in preparing that sermon. I decided to talk about the logo I had chosen for this new congregation – a sail boat. Here is some of what I said that morning. It will give you some insight into what was in my head that day and is still in my head 30 years later.

On a cold winter day like this when we woke up to below zero temperatures, I want you to imagine yourself on the shore of a lake on a beautiful summer day watching the sailboats and catamarans skim across the water. Notice how they dart back and forth, continually changing directions.

When I was young, I thought that a boat could only go in the direction the wind was blowing. I figured that Columbus must have had a good northeast wind when he came to the New World and that he had to wait for a southwest breeze to take him back to Spain again.

Of course, I’ve since found out that that’s not how sailboats work. An experienced sailor can go in just about any direction, regardless of the direction of the wind, by adjusting the sails and the rudder. The wind is the most important factor, of course, but the same wind can propel boats in different directions.

You will notice on our banner that the logo chosen for this congregation is a ship. That was chosen for a couple of reasons. First, it reminds us of the missionary journeys that Barnabas took around the Mediterranean Sea, proclaiming the gospel of Christ. But it was also chosen because a ship has for centuries been a symbol of the church. Just as Noah’s ark was a means of salvation for his family, so the church is a means of salvation for all who enter it.

This ship also has a sail, for it is driven by the wind of the Spirit. We believe that it is God’s Spirit who has called and gathered us here today and will continue to empower us in the years ahead. But that doesn’t mean that the church always goes where the Spirit wants it to go. You see, my ill-conceived idea that ships were at the mercy of the direction of the wind is just as erroneous in relationship to the church-ship as it is for a sailboat on Lake Minnetonka.

All of which means that our church-ship must have a clear sense of its destination or it will be blown in all sorts of directions. We run the risk of being like the cruise ship whose captain announced over the loudspeakers, “Ladies and gentlemen, I have good news and bad news. The bad news is that we are lost. The good news is that we are making good time.”

A church that is busy with many activities is often commended for its fine program, but unless it has its destination clearly in mind, it is just like that cruise ship – making good time, but for no real purpose because it doesn’t know where it is going.

And so, as the ship St. Barnabas begins its journey today, we must take a moment to chart our course. Let's call the route of our journey "doing God's will". We'll define this with Jesus' answer to the question, "What is the greatest commandment?" Jesus said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." Whoever fulfills these fulfills all of God's law, God's will for how we live.

As the wind of the Spirit drives our ship along, we have two means of affecting our course – we have a rudder and a sail. Our rudder is God's Word, a Word that God made explicit for us in the life of Jesus Christ. Sometimes this Word is a word of grace, accepting us and comforting us. Other times it is a word of judgement, confronting us and calling us to change. We find this Word of God in the Bible, and it is our guide as we steer our ship.

In addition to the rudder of God's Word, we have a sail to help us make sure we are "on course." In the ship logo of St. Barnabas, this sail is identified with a cross, the cross of Christ. Jesus said to his disciples, and says to us, "Whoever would come after me must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me."

This is a hard saying. To follow Jesus is not to follow a superstar, one who promises success and prosperity. To follow Jesus is to follow a servant, one who emptied himself of all his power and became one of us. He lived with us, laughed with us, cried with us, identified with us, and finally, out of an almost incomprehensible love, died for us. To follow the servant Jesus is to be a servant to others. That is the sail we use to catch the wind of the Spirit.

You put all of these things together and you have beautiful picture: God has given us our ship, the church. The ship is propelled by the wind of God's Spirit. The ship is steered by the rudder of God's Word and the sail of the cross. There's only one flaw, and it's not even a small flaw. It's a biggy!

The flaw God left in the picture is that God has left us at the controls of the ship. We are the ones entrusted with handling the rudder and the sail. That might not be so bad, but it is not always easy to determine just exactly what God's will is for a particular situation.

For example, how does God's will come into consideration when a congregation plans its annual budget? For that matter, how does God's will affect the use of our personal resources? On a different level, is God for or against nuclear technology?

God's will affects every aspect of our individual and corporate lives. The Spirit is blowing in the same direction for all of us, but depending on how we make use of that rudder and sail, we may end up going different directions, sometimes even opposite directions, of other Christians. I think this is a helpful insight into understanding that Christians can have honest disagreements with each other and not have to call into question the validity of another's faith.

What all this boils down to is this: As we launch our St. Barnabas ship this morning, the basic outline of our journey is charted for us as we endeavor to do God's will. However, the exact route we will follow has not been determined. We have to live and sail one day at a time, see where the Spirit is directing us, and then use God's Word and the example of Christ as best we can. Sometimes we will get off course – you might say that sin tends to distort our compass. Fortunately, we have a gracious God who is patient and willing to get us back on track.

The journey has begun for St. Barnabas. I can't promise you where it will lead. As with most journeys, there will be enjoyment, difficulties, excitement, and sorrow. The one thing I can promise you is that it is the Lord's ship. And he'll never let it sink.

That was the sermon 30 years ago. It was the beginning of our journey. Over the years the Spirit has indeed led us to some unexpected places and supplied us with many blessings. Friends have come and gone. Some new ministries and programs have worked great and some not so well. But all in all, God has richly blessed us, and all we can say is, "Now Thank We All Our God". Today we're no longer at the beginning of a journey, we are somewhere in the middle of it, and we're sailing along with the same resources we started out with – a sail, a rudder, and the wind of God's Spirit.

On the inside cover of your bulletin you'll see our mission statement. "Sent by Jesus, we set our sails to be filled by God's Spirit, inspiring us to praise, grow, and serve." My hope is that these old words from 30 years ago will help you understand more clearly the imagery of "setting our sails" that underlies that mission statement and that we'll keep working together to bring that mission statement to life each day.