

Parting from Privilege

By Rev. Anne Weirich

Well, one of the reasons I really love this picture not just not only because Jesus preaches from a boat, which I think would be a really amazing thing to do, was that I grew up fishing. Fishing trips were the only kind of vacation my father liked to take. So we went fishing every summer to a place called Lost Lake in Wisconsin. I was the oldest so when I was about eight years old dad would wake me up before sunrise when the lake was still covered in thick mist and we put out in a wooden row boat and really quietly put his back into it and glide out to a cove across the lake. And then we'd switch places and I'd slowly row really quietly and without splashing while he trolled for fish. He was always looking for silver northerns or a very shy fish called walleye. And the quiet would only be broken if he lands one and then there'd be chaos as I shipped the oars and scramble around with the net and then help him bring in some really good fish.

I remember clearly the struggle of the fish to get away and for my dad to land them. I didn't like that so much. Those fishing trips taught me a lot of things. I learned about life, I learned about death... as I put a minnow on a hook or watched the life go out from a fish. I learned that lesson about how things have to die so that we can eat. Gliding out into the mist, across the lake in a wooden boat, the creak of oars, the strong presence of my father, the mist burning off with the sun, taught me that it was okay to be lost on a lake. But over the years, when I'm in a fishing boat, I would rather be at the oars than do the fishing. I'll leave the fishing to others. But, yes, I do like to have fish for breakfast, anytime. We can learn a lot in a boat, especially when Jesus is doing the teaching. In fact, from the very beginning of the church we fashioned our buildings to be like a boat. Some of you are there in the sanctuary. If we were all sitting in a sanctuary, instead of being on the Zoom screen, we would all be sitting in our pews in what's called a nave of a church. The nave is where people gather. Nave is a nautical word. You can hear it in the word naval.

One of the very early Christian writers was a man from Africa and named Tertullian, started all this, we think. He wrote about Peter's boat in the year 150, saying,

That the little ship did present a figure of the church, in that she is disquieted "in the sea," That is, in the world, "by the waves." "...the Lord, through patience, sleeping as it were, until, roused ...checks the world; and restores tranquility to His own."(Tertullianus, *Quintus.*"XII". *De Baptismo.* p. 1214.)

This is a beautiful image that over time, the Roman church, which was the main church back then, set it all down on paper. They even specified the building should have a long nave like a ship, with its head to the east and the priest was to be seated as the captain. And the deacons were to be called mariners. The mariners' job was to prepare the places for all the people who would come, as if they were preparing for passengers on a boat. And they even had special things that they wore, close fitting garments; to make all this management easier. (Unknown (375–380). *Apostolic Constitutions II.*)

I think a lot of us like this idea of the church. It's just a very safe space; where things are prepared for us when we arrive. And even though all feels lost around us, we have Jesus here, restoring our tranquility. You know the hymn "a shelter from the stormy blast and our eternal home". Right? The place where we learn things. And where we serve one another. That's why we love our church buildings, where all is prepared for us. And this is really interesting to think about because for a long time, we haven't been able to be inside a church building as much as we used to, right? We're making our own preparations. We're learning new technology and maybe we're even gathering bagels and orange juice for home communion. There's a lot of chaos out there these days. And it's not just in the church. And we know it doesn't always feel like the church is there for us exactly like it used to be, right? But I wonder about whether that may be a good thing. I want us to stretch a minute and think about church as a privilege instead of a shelter from the outside world. So maybe the story can help us see our big old boats in a different way. Even if it means doing the exact opposite of what we have always done. We don't know the exact words that Jesus taught everyone while standing on his friend Peter's boat that day. But we do know that he taught Peter, James and John that even though they were the fishing experts, they didn't know everything about fishing. When he sent them back out there with their nets, Jesus showed them that it wasn't the sea that was empty. It was their nets that were empty. After he broke their hold on knowing the way, he kept going --he fished for them. He cast his net upon

them.... . He said, "Come on, leave this lake, and I'll show you that we don't even need a boat to fish." He gathered them into his net - even as they left theirs. And we need to figure out what Jesus is doing in this story –so that we can fish like this in a new way. Because I suspect that some of us are like me, I'd rather row, row the boat, and leave the fishing to others.

To do this, I want to consider a man that I've recently come to know through this writing and his work, his name is Trabian Shorters. He's a philanthropist and a leader and teacher. He describes his young self as a “black boy, tech nerd genius, raised in the hood.”

I want to pause here because I need to acknowledge that as a white woman of privilege, I am a participant in a culture that was the crucible of his work. And by sharing his words, I hope not to appropriate them as my own but to offer them to create brave space that will allow us all to lean into what the Dalai Lama recently said about the pandemic. He said “that only by coming together...will we meet the unprecedented magnitude of the challenges we face.”

(<https://medium.com/progressively-speaking/message-to-white-allies-from-a-black-racial-dialogue-expert-youre-doing-it-wrong-39c09b3908a5>).

Trabian was raised in his grandparents' home where the religion was Christian. And it was the “love doctrine.” Meaning that his grandparents had an orientation to life, which was always love in action. Loving people as God loves them. And among other things, Trabian learned how to hack computers. That skill taught him that “you have to understand a system well enough to get it to do something it was not designed to do.”

Now he doesn't hack computers anymore. But he hacks, culture, our culture specifically, he studies all of our systems and he borrows also heavily on his grandparents' love doctrine. And he gathers people together and then brings that knowledge together and then teaches people how to do the same. So we can adapt the culture and system to get it to do what it was not designed to do. And he has a term for this. He calls it "Asset-Framing". And he gives an example from his own context, that I want to read to you, listen carefully to his words. "I'm a black person" he said " and I'm taught to believe that I must 'Deficit-Frame' my people, I must dramatize the disparity, stigmatize my people, so that I can attract resources. If I can define them by their worst threat,

greatest inequity, whatever, then I can attract resources. Well, this culture of denigration for dollars means that; yes, I will attract the resources, but I do so by writing my population into the public consciousness as inferior, as ineffective, as pathological. All these things are the only ways that people know us. Because the way we have been taught to survive is by dramatizing our injustices, which — I think it's important to point out our injustices, they're real. So we're not saying ignore it. But what we're saying is, it's not what defines us. That's not what defines anyone." So this is his message: deficits don't define anyone. Empty nets don't define us.

Now I want to try a simple exercise that Trabian uses with groups and might be kind of hard, my face is in the middle of the screen, so maybe we can change it so we are all on the screen, in one big block, just for a moment, if that's possible. And I want everybody to pick a square on the zoom screen, it doesn't matter who it is.

And look at that one person. Are we all on the screen yet? All right. Or if you can't do that, just imagine. Think of somebody and then look at them and then make a mental list of everything that's wrong about that person. Whether it's just the person or maybe background, just take a moment, think about everything that's wrong with what you are seeing. (gap in speaking) It doesn't take long for that to not feel very good. Right? I think we could go back to the way we had screen before.

It doesn't really feel very good to think about somebody only in a negative way, does it? Then, it feels a little bit even harder if we then remember that somebody may have just done this to you, to us, to me. What does it feel like to be some kind of container because of what someone thinks is wrong with you?

This is the deficit framing Trabian talks about. And he uses this method to help people think about that. And I think it's good for us as a church to remember the feelings that we might have had while we did this or had done to us the next time we are face to face with an injustice that we need deal with. I'd say, Trabian would say, this is the first step to how to walk away from our usual nets and boats and fish, and fish with people, rather than for people. Peter, James and John learned that it can't happen until we're willing to be undone in this way. Remember, Jesus

showed them the sea wasn't empty, but their nets were. So then how do we hack this deficit defining system? Trabian says we do it by asset framing. And it works like this: he said we need to change the way our minds see. We all have patterns in there already. We need to be aware that, change that. And then we need to change the language we use when we're talking about a situation. We figure out how to raise up the asset, and the aspiration at the center of a person rather than what's wrong. One of the examples he gives is kids of color, who are in school, are often named "at risk."

But really, he said they aren't "at risk", they are students who face obstacles to graduation. They're not part of some 'school-to-prison pipeline.' What we need to do is focus on the obstacles in the road -- systems are the problem -- not the kid. Kids need to be aspiring students, not some circumstance.

I think if the church were to embrace this kind of approach to being the church, we could be engaged in a whole new kind of public discipleship. Instead of always creating safe spaces only we could also create brave spaces. Instead of going out into the world to see great need we might go out into the world and see it as teeming with great abundance -- enough to sink two boats. Just imagine the joy, the challenge, the energy, imagination, and love that could be enjoined to gather together, if only we could let go of the privilege of church and follow Jesus into the deficit destroying vision of life in all its fullness for all people. Now this could be a huge change for us. It might feel like all the hosts of heaven are singing in a minor key while the church doors shake on their hinges and smoke and mist fill the room where we might be tempted to be like Peter and fall on our knees and say, "Oh Lord not me." or we could be like Paul and say, "I am the least... I am unfit."

We could even be like old King Josiah off there in the distance, kind of in the background, while his son takes over. But really the time is now. Trabian Shorter leads us I think because he is sort of excited about all this chaos that's around us these days. We might be exhausted by it. But he says we can reframe our cultural chaos as an asset. Because we do that and there's a lot of potential. It's my generation and its comfortable hold on our culture dies away, the next generation that comes in is the most diverse generation of our lifetimes. This means there's going

to be a lot of instability in this shift. It's one of the reasons **reason** no longer works and we all feel so divided. But Trabian frames this instability as an asset because it opens up brave new spaces. You there at Providence Presbyterian are already there in so many ways. Your multiculturalism is a witness of what happens in a brave space. But even so as time goes on, as power shifts, gender roles, identity and racial identity, privilege, social status, all the usual containers we make for one another, all that's going to be challenged and changed because it doesn't fit the experience of the next generation. A writer for the New York Times pointed out that right now at one of our protestant seminaries, has representatives of 110 different denominations from 90 countries. Sometimes at chapel, the communion service looks like a Japanese tea service, and the new clergy aren't interested in working in our old boats, sitting in the captain's chair. They want to build new house churches that are out there in the chaos. I don't know but it seems to be like this new generation understands better than my generation ever did that “, that only by coming together ...will we meet the unprecedented magnitude of the challenges we face.”.

Trabian says it like this:

"The simple fact of the matter is we are literally all in the same boat. We have the same set of aspirations, we overlap in our highest values, our highest aspirations, about 90%. This is what the research shows. It's amazing how much we overlap.

I always loved that whenever my grandpa would say 'Well, you know, in the real world ...' blah, blah, blah, like whatever came after that. But here's the thing, anytime, my grandpa said 'the real world', he was talking about spirit life, your spirit life, your aspirations, your assets, that's the real world. Everything we do is an expression of what's going on in our spirit world. And so the question then becomes, what is the spirit that you want to feed? That's it. Who do you think you are? Whatever you feed will grow."

I like what Trabian has to say, I think this is the love doctrine isn't it? We're all in the same boat. Maybe this is even what Jesus was teaching the crowds that day, he showed it to Peter, James and John: Love as we are loved.

We are all in the same boat. And this is why you don't need our own, old boat anymore the way you used to. So the time is now my friend to signal our partners, put down our nets and start asking those questions of ourselves and the people right next to us. Who do you think you are? What is the spirit that you want to feed?"

And then when we hear the answers, build on that. Build the next boat together. But most of all...., do not be afraid.

Alleulia. Amen.

All the Trabian Shorter quotes are from: <https://onbeing.org/programs/trabian-shorters-a-cognitive-skill-to-magnify-humanity/>

(Transcript by Ruth Kirlaw, assisted by notes from Rev. Anne Weirich)