

## THE IMPORTANCE OF SHIP-MATES

Lessons from Gilligan's Island  
Saint Paul's UMC – Joplin, MO

Among the hot sellers for Christmas this year were the GPS navigational systems. Have you seen these things? Very cool! You put in your starting point and where you're heading and it plots it all out for you. Every turn, right. And if you make a wrong turn, it adjusts and directs you back on course. And the really cool features to me (because I'm not often going someplace that I haven't been before) are that it will tell you all the restaurants and gas stations and stuff all along the way and will calculate to the minute when you will arrive at your destination. These little devices are designed to keep your journeys trouble free. They help us navigate our journeys better.

Today we're going to look at the ways we can better navigate through the journey of life. The word navigate means literally "to steer a ship". So today, as we head into 2008, let's take little time to look at the way we are steering the ship that is your life and mine. It's important, because God has some ideas about this, so let's look at God's wisdom for ways to navigate our journeys better.

Since navigate is a sea faring term, we will be using some sea faring metaphors to help us. This is not such a far-fetched idea. Throughout church history, one of the images of the church is that it is God's ship of salvation. The central part of a cathedral, for instance, is called a nave. Nave shares the same latin root as navigate, which is *navis* or ship. Many traditional churches are designed to resemble a ship turned upside down, with the ceiling meant to resemble the inside of a ship, or an ark.

So the church is like a ship. And every ship needs a what? Captain! So the first question for you to answer today about the journey of your life is who is at the helm? Really, who is at the helm? Jesus wants to be your captain. And he wants you to be on his ship. But most of us really want to be our own captains, don't we. And this is a critical question because it addresses the way we navigate through life. Who is setting your course? Are you on the ship with Jesus, are you on mission with him and his purpose of building God's kingdom or are you on your own mission?

This may be the first place today that you need to seek a course correction. You can tell who the captain of your life is by figuring out what mission it is that you're on in life. And if it's not the mission of Jesus, then today would be a good day to do something about that. If you're on the wrong mission, or if you are not on any mission at all, then you are missing out on the joy and the challenge of the greatest adventure of all. That is what Jesus promises if you let him be your captain.

Now if you're at all like me, not that I would wish that upon you, then what you really want is for Jesus to be your part-time captain. If you're like me, then you want to drive. You want to set the course. You want to do life on your terms with your strength. And then when you find that you are too far off course, then it's, "OK, Jesus, can you take the wheel for awhile?" And Jesus is always going to be faithful to us. That is one of his promises. He's not going to abandon us when we've navigated our lives into messes. But just think about how many messes, how much pain, how many mistakes we could avoid if we let Jesus navigate us around them in the first place.

But don't misunderstand me. I am not saying that life with Jesus is always smooth sailing! He never promised that. In fact, what he did promise was that if we climbed on board of his ship, we would definitely see some storms! That's just life...there are storms. There are hardships. There will be grief and heartache and pain and illness and struggling. Jesus does not promise to lead us around all the storms of life. He might be able to lead us around troubles of our own making...hardships we would inflict on others or ourselves if he weren't leading our lives, but he never makes any promise about not having to deal death or disaster or tough breaks. The storms of life will come. Any ship at sea will have to face the storms.

What Jesus does say about these storms is not that we will avoid them, but that we will overcome them through the strength and abilities of our captain and his crew – our shipmates. For us to navigate through life well, it is important for us to be on the right ship (church) and to have the right captain (Jesus) and to have people who are on the journey with us (shipmates).

We need shipmates, people who are on the journey with us. God does not intend for us to journey through life in a kayak, but in a larger ship where we help one-another make the journey. So let's take a few minutes to look at the function of Christian Friendships, because we need others to successfully navigate through life.

### **We were built for companionship**

The New Testament, the part of the Bible that tells us about Jesus and his ship, the church, presupposes that you are going to live out your faith with people alongside of you. I know that there are some folks who say, "You know what, I don't need anyone else. I don't need the church, I don't need to be in a small group. I can do this all by myself. It's between me and God. And you know, I can worship God on the golf course just as well as anywhere else.

I play a little golf. And while it is true that you can worship God anywhere and anytime, and granted, I do hear people calling on God's name quite a bit, but it doesn't sound very worshipful. And you know, it's not just between you and God. Jesus makes it pretty clear that it's also about other people! It's not just that you need other people, it's also that other people will need you! You need the church, and the church needs you. The church is God's idea. We didn't make it up. This is God's idea – the way we do ministry together. The way we learn from each other – God's idea. The way we support and encourage each other - God's idea. The way we take care of each other – God's idea. The way we challenge each other – God's idea.

The New Testament pre-supposes that you are going to be connected with other Christians as you travel on this journey. And this is very obvious in the more than 30 "one another" passages. Do you know what I'm talking about? These are usually commands about the way we should treat one another. You know some of them; Jesus told us to love another as he has loved us. He told us to forgive one another. He told us to serve one another. Paul said we are to bear one another's burdens and teach and admonish one another. All of that pre-supposes that you are doing Christianity together with other people. You do need other people, and they need you.

Jonah is my favorite Old Testament story. And in this story, a prophet named Jonah is called by God to deliver a message of doom to their arch enemies and the super-power dominating the world at that time, whose capital was the the city of Ninevah. Now Jonah flees from God and instead of heading overland to Ninevah, jumps on a ship to Spain. There could be lots of good reasons not to want to challenge your enemies to repent. One of them could be because they would chop off your head! Jonah's reason seems to be that he's afraid that the Ninevites will actually listen and repent. That's not the outcome Jonah wants so he takes off and while he's on this ship, the storm comes up and God is trying to get his attention. But Jonah remains asleep while all the others work frantically to keep the ship afloat, throwing over the cargo and lightening the load. And the sailors wake him up and confront him and say, "What have you done that God would be this angry?" And then Jonah tells them what he has done and they ask what they should do to help him, he tells them to throw him overboard to deal with God. Now, let's not hope that you never need your friends to throw you overboard. But you will need people who will help you stop running from your fears. You will need people who will push you to take up God's challenges in life. You will need friends who will help you put your life back into God's hands. Jonah needed those people to throw his life back to God, help him return to God's mission for him. We all need other people in our Christian journey to keep our life on mission.

Let's talk about how we develop those kinds of relationships, those life-enriching relationships; how we find companionship.

### **Keys to developing and sustaining life-enriching relationships.**

First it requires that we make an intentional decision that we are going to pursue developing these relationships. We have to value the idea of having friends. We cannot sit back and wait for them to come, we have to be intentional about creating them. You have to take the initiative! Of course it's easier to just be content with having lots of acquaintances. But acquaintances rarely enrich your life.

I know what that feels like to have lots and acquaintances and few friends. I've been the pastor at a church and felt that before. I would be at church surrounded by all these people. I would greet a couple hundred people at church on a Sunday, but still feel this deep sense of loneliness. Why? Because, at least at that church, we were all passengers on the same ship, but no one was being intentional about becoming shipmates. It is possible to be in this room this morning, with hundreds of other people and still feel alone. Why, because having acquaintances is not the same as having companions. So let me challenge you to take initiative and be intentional about joining some group or study or serving with others, because that is the way we move from acquaintances to friends.

I want you to know that if you just want to be a passenger on the ship that is called Saint Paul's then you can do that all you want. But you're going to have to endure endless invitations from us to become a shipmate. And we're going to start making it personal. We're going to start sending personal invitations to get connected because we want you to experience the life that is really the life. And that means having companions and helpers in life. We are changing the way we do church so that we are becoming more and more intentional about helping you make the move from being a passenger to being part of the crew. We want to do anything we can to help you get connected with other people on this journey in Christ.

Nancy Hampton's new staff position is designed to help us be way more intentional about helping people develop relationships and find places to grow or serve. We already ask everyone who is partnering in ministry with us through membership if they will be intentional about joining small groups and courses and serving so that they can develop these relationships. Minimally, we want to help people get connected and let relationships develop from there. That's what this small group brochure is about that is in your program today. That's what every item on the Friendship form is about every week. Helping you find ways to get into groups or to serve and to help you connect to other people. We hope that getting you connected to others in study, prayer, or service will help you grow in your faith as well. Ultimately, in your life, it's up to you. You will have to make the choice to be intentional about developing these relationships and you can't wait until it is convenient or until you feel like it.

So here are some questions you need to ask yourself today to see if your life needs some course correction. Say you're struggling or having a hardship. Maybe it's a relational thing, maybe it's a financial thing, maybe it is a spiritual thing. But there's something happening. Do you have someone you can be real with to share this with? Someone who will pray with you and walk with you? If you don't have anyone you can be that vulnerable with, then you need a course correction.

Or how about this. At 3 AM when the wheels come off of the bus of your life, do you have someone to call who will come and help? If you do, that's great! That's our hope. But if not, then maybe it's time for you to take some steps toward building real relationships. And here's another question. Are you on someone else's list of people to call at 3 AM?

It is essential in this journey of life to have these kinds of relationships. For my first couple of years here at Saint Paul's I had a small group of men that I met with and prayed with. It was the safe place to talk about our struggles, get wisdom and encouragement from each other, challenge each other and pray for each other. Because it became less and less convenient due to schedule changes and life changes, we dropped off last spring and never came back. I've been doing life without those particular ship-mates for 6 months or more now. I have other ship-mates in my life, but these are the ones I would call at 3 AM. I know that I'm moving back toward being a pastor with lots of acquaintances again. I needed a course correction, and so my shipmates and I are regrouping in a few weeks. What about you?

So OK, let's say you're convinced that you need to develop these relationships and it's important enough that you are going to take the time to develop them, but you're wondering, "How do I do it?" And we've already talked about the first step, getting involved in a small group. And, by the way, you can start your own small group. Call some friends and get them together and give me a call and we'll help you get started.

Another key to developing life-enriching relationships happens as you are meeting people and getting to know people, and it's something you already know. It's an old adage and it's a bit cliché, but there's lots of truth in it. The only way to have a friend is what? Be a friend! If you want to develop life-enriching relationships, you have to give life-enrichment to other people. If you are getting started in a group and you do all the talking and everyone else does all the listening, you are not likely to develop life-enriching relationships. If you do all the taking and other people do all the giving, you are not likely to develop life-enriching relationships.

So the key is for you to ask, "How can I bless other people? How can I serve other people? How can I minister to them? How can I come alongside of them during a difficult time? How do I help them on their journey?" When you ask that, you are on your way to enriching the life of someone else. And when you do this, you find that the others either reciprocate or they don't. And if they don't, then they remain acquaintances and if they do, they become friends and companions. This is how we develop relationships. It requires some risk and it requires sacrifice.

You say, "I don't have time to take dinner to them!" Of course you don't, but you do it anyway because you want to serve them and invest in them. You say, "I don't have time to stop by the hospital on my way home." But you do it anyway, because this is what is important in life. This is what it means to enrich someone's life.

So maybe at this point you see the need for course corrections and you are deciding that you will be intentional about getting connected in a group or ministry. But the last little objection in your mind is something like this. "What if I go to that study or group and I meet people that I don't think I'm going to like?" What if there's a really goofy guy who always states the obvious (that's me in a group by the way). What if you go and there's someone whose voice just grates on your nerves. I went to an adoption course once and there was one person...every time that person spoke I was covering my ears. Drove me crazy.

Maybe someone has a nervous tick, or a very different political view or whatever. Thing is, you can always find some reason to not like someone. Usually it is fairly superficial. But what happens when you stick it out and have some patience is that you begin to look past those superficial shortcomings, just as they begin to look past yours. And in time, you begin to form a lasting friendship.

Many of you know that Aaron Brown, lead pastor here, and I are longtime friends. We started in seminary together back in 1988. I remember when I first met Aaron. It was a very brief meeting in the summer of 88, and my immediate reaction was, "I'm not sure I'm going to like this guy." His reaction was probably similar. He probably thought I was a dweeb or something – maybe still does! It just goes to show that God can use some strange people to make an impact in your life. You need to remain open to that! In time, people who have nothing in common can become life-enriching friends. If you stick with that group, they will grow on you.

All of this makes me think of a story that happened a long time ago. Maybe you know this story. It was 1964, the year after I was born and there was a ship that set sail that never returned. It was a small group of people that didn't even know each other. They ended up shipwrecked on an uncharted island somewhere, and it became an amazing story of how these very different people came together and just helped each other survive. And even though they didn't care for each other at first, by the time they were rescued they so cared about each other that they wanted to stay together for the rest of their lives. We have their story on video. Take a look.

**Gilligan's Island TV show Intro ([youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...) – season 2 color).**

Did you know that this show really only ran for 3 seasons? Yet I think it's been on TV ever since. I used to watch it every afternoon after school. Did you know that it took 15 years to get off the island? It was in the 1978 made for TV movie when they finally got rescued, and then they were so connected to each other by that time that they all decided to go back! And that's where they've been living every since, on that tiny deserted island.

What I love about the Gilligan's Island thing is that it really is a picture of how small groups work. You throw a bunch of people together in life's stormy circumstances and they are people with

little or nothing in common. I mean, what does Gilligan have in common with the Howell's? Nothing, except that they are both stranded and struggling and trying to work out their salvation.

And what you're going to find in most small groups is that there is someone who is like the Skipper. They are natural leaders who are willing to lead the group and take charge. There are hapless, loveable, first mates in the group who make you wonder how they ever made it this far in life. But in time you see that he's the one who almost all the time brings the salvation for the group. And there's the homecoming queen from high school, and there's the Mary Ann who makes the cookies all the time and takes care of everyone else. You have the couple that has more money than anyone else in the group, and you have some geeky, tecky, left-brained guy who doesn't quite get the whole spiritual thing.

And here's how it happened on Gilligan's island...they worked out their salvation together. The Howell's figured out that it wasn't all about money. Where did they learn that? From Gilligan and the rest. And Ginger learned that it wasn't all about looks or all about her. The Skipper learns how to be a better leader. They all learned from each other, and they learned to see the gifts that hide underneath of the surface, and they learned to love each other. And that's how it is in small groups. That's how it works in Christian Community.

This is what Paul means in I Corinthians 12 when he talks about all the different parts of the body. We're all different. Different experiences, different thoughts, different gifts and abilities; yet together we make up one body. Paul is saying that we need each other. We were never meant to do life alone.

About a year ago one couple in our church decided that they weren't going to do life alone anymore. Enough with acquaintances; it was time to develop life-enriching relationships. They gathered together some acquaintances and started a small group in their home that meets every other week. Everyone committed to giving this some time. Their group continued to meet all through last spring, and they were probably a bit more sporadic through the summer, but came back together in the fall.

When someone in the church approached me this fall about finding some people to help paint a few rooms at the Turn-around Ranch, a place for troubled teens, I suggested that they talk to this group. This group took on the project, and afterward decided to stay connected to these kids. Our church hosts a Christmas party for some kids from Turn-Around Ranch every year. Some of the tags on the gift tree were gifts for these kids. We treat them to a night out at Stout's pizza. And every year we hope that just a few people from the church will show up in support.

This year, my family and I went, and we couldn't fit in the party room. It was filled with kids from the ranch, their sponsors and social workers, and with the families of this small group. They were all there except for one person who couldn't get off from work. I just watched that night, how this small group of people had become invested into each other's lives. It was a snapshot moment to me of what Christian life should look like. I think it's the way God designed life to be. And it's the life God wants you to have...

So take a look this morning at the course of your life. Do you need to make some course corrections? Who really is your captain? And who are your shipmates?