

Sermon by Stan Dotson for COM 9/17/17
“Carried Away”
Romans 12:9-16

There are clues in the book of Romans that tell us Paul was writing to a people of privilege, people like us. Listen now to the text, written for people like us:

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly;[b] do not claim to be wiser than you are.

b. Or, *give yourselves to humble tasks.*

The Word of God for the people of privilege. Thanks be to God.

One of the most hopeful phrases I ever hear coming from the mouth of a preacher, is “I have a word from the Lord.” If only that were literally true. *A word.* Alas, it turns out to be a false hope, the idea that a message or sermon could be boiled down to one single word. There is generally around 20 minutes worth of words from the Lord’s mouthpiece.

But today, I have it, *a word from the Lord*, a word found in the Greek New Testament that we just heard translated into English, from verse 16. It’s a word that has been historically mistranslated, misinterpreted, misapplied, abused. But nonetheless, get ready, here’s the word: *synapágo*. Ok, there you have it, *synapágo*. Don’t you feel inspired, challenged, spiritually fed? Ready to move on to the pot luck? Ah, there’s the rub with having a word from the Lord, you usually have to speak a lot of other words to explain it. Sorry.

You’ve heard that a picture is worth a thousand words, so a video clip must be worth even more, so to spare you some of my words, let me illustrate *synapágo* with a couple of brief videos. First, for the outdoor types, here’s a clip from *A River Runs Through It* [play scene where the Brad Pitt character is in the river, catches a big one, loses his footing, and is carried down the river]. The thing I love about that scene is you’re not sure who has caught whom. And the fact the Brad Pitt kept his hat on all through the whitewater.

But not everyone is into the outdoor nature scene. So here’s another clip, this time for all you rock and roll lovers. It’s from a PBS documentary on Eddie Vedder and Pearl Jam. [play scene where they show a collage of Eddie Vedder’s stage diving and crowd surfing]. I love that PBS decided to do this. Talk about trusting your crowd! Taking such a dive really is a leap of faith, which is to say, you’re not guaranteed smooth surfing, as Jack Black found out in *School of Rock* [play 10-second scene where the Jack Black character dives off the stage, the crowd parts like the Red Sea, and he does a belly-flop on the floor].

Both Brad Pitt and Eddie Vedder beautifully illustrate the word *synapágo*. The word only appears three times in the Greek New Testament, and the other two times it is almost always correctly translated. In Galatians 2:13, Paul warns the church not to be *carried away* by the hypocrisy of Peter and Barnabas' legalism. And in 2 Peter 3:17, Peter warns the church not to lose their stability and be *carried away* by lawlessness. Interesting public argument Paul and Peter are having here on their respective social media sites. They both use the concept of *synapágo* in the way we are accustomed to hearing the concept: in the negative. Don't get carried away, don't get swept away. We are often warned against losing our grip, our footing.

But here in our text for today, Romans 12, Paul employs *synapágo* in the positive, as an imperative: *Be carried away*. It's a counter-intuitive message for those of us who value being well-grounded. The culture of privilege socializes us to be steadfast, anchored, to hold fast, be on solid ground. We value a firm foundation, a strong foothold. We raise our young to be unswerving, unwavering, unfaltering, well-established. We value our sense of agency. Moreover, when Paul goes on to say what we should be carried away by, it becomes an even more radical counter-cultural message to people of privilege. Be carried away *by the poor*, be swept away *by the marginalized, the vulnerable*.

Not many of us want to give up control; we particularly don't want to be led away by people of lower status, to have our way directed by people who don't seem have their lives together. That's backwards— the poor are supposed to get carried away by the privileged; we're supposed to fix their lives and equip them for upward mobility. So when English translators of the Greek New Testament got to Romans 12, their assumptions of privilege trumped their fidelity to scholarship. The King James Version has Paul telling us “not to mind high things but *condescend* to men of low estate.” The New Revised Standard reads “do not be haughty but *associate with* the lowly,” similar to the New International Version, “*be willing to associate with* people of low position.” The Good News Bible tells us “do not be proud, but *accept* humble duties.” *Condescend, associate with, accept*. Those words fit well into the world of privilege. *Be swept away; get carried away, surrender control*. Those words don't quite roll off the tongue.

Nonetheless, when I think about what Kim and I are doing in our Cuba adventure, the best word I can find to express our hopes for what is happening is *synapágo*. We have been and are being swept away, carried away in the current of an incredibly vibrant and vulnerable people. To tweak the metaphor a bit, we are being carried away by a sacred spiri; the wind is blowing us where it wills via this jetstream of Cuban resilience and faith. I love that Nancy used Lázaro Ceballo's St. Francis icon for the children's time. I'm reminded of the first time I went to visit Lázaro and Tamara's home. There was such a palpable spirit about this modest home, a richness, a depth, a simplicity that is so appealing, so attractive. That people can craft such lives of beauty and creativity and community in the context of such challenging need is a wonder to me.

To fall hook line and sinker for that wonder is a true leap of faith, coming from the privileged heights of power and security. It is a risk, and it just might be that the sea will part and we will fall as flat as Jack Black. While that's not so likely, given our relationships there, it is probable that the current will carry us to uncomfortable places. I recognize that I've not yet completely surrendered, that I'm going to be carrying some pockets of privilege with me as I get swept away. Rivers have all sorts of twists and turns and rocky whitewater patches, and I can imagine

there will be times when I'm like the Brad Pitt character, trying to grab hold of a rock to slow down and regain my secure footing. It's a scary thing to be swept away.

I think about those first disciples and would be disciples who were being pulled into the current of Jesus' movement. I think about Peter and Andrew and James and John, who in the middle of mending their nets were swept away, leaving their nets behind. I think about how much time we spend mending our nets, our networks, social and otherwise. What if I'm called to leave these nets behind? Would I have the courage of those first fishermen? I think about the rich young man who was called to sell everything and give it to the poor. He may have stuck a toe into the river, but was not able to allow himself to be carried away, because he had too much stuff. He went away, foothold in the world intact, but sorrowful. Would I be more like Peter and Andrew, or this rich young man, if the current carried me all the way to a place where I was called to give up my privileged citizenship, my passport, my property, and live in total solidarity with the Cubans?

At this stage, I go with the excitement and fear, the trust and trepidation that comes with not knowing where the current will carry us. Ultimately, I believe it will carry us all to that great ocean depth of happy rest; as the Billy Joel song says, we all end in the ocean and we all start in the stream. In between comes the adventure. And "as Bilbo used to say, there was only one Road; that it was like a great river: its springs were at every doorstep, and every path was its tributary. 'It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out of your door,' he used to say. 'You step into the Road, and if you don't keep your feet, there is no knowing where you might be swept off to.'" *Synapágo*. May it be so. Amen.