

The Wired Word

Student Handout

Hope for Healing Personal Wounds and Relationships

Sunday, November 15, 2020 --- from 9:00-9:45am

Hybrid Class

In Person: First Floor Social Hall (Mask & Social Distancing Required)

or

Zoom: Meeting ID: 860 8980 7220 --- Passcode: 195152

Dear Class Member,

Our next lesson reviews a recently released inspirational documentary on the first all-black high school rowing crew that launched in 1997. The film picks up the story of core team members 20 years later, as they reunite to compete again in the Chicago Sprints, this time with members of the Chicago Police Department.

Our lesson touches on themes of uniting for a common purpose, healing areas of personal brokenness and relationships, and overcoming obstacles "to leave the world better than we found it." We explore how God can transform ashes into beauty and restore us to usefulness and wholeness.

How To Participate:

We are offering The Wired Word as a hybrid class. You can participate in person or via Zoom. The Wired Word will be from 9:00am-9:45am on Sunday mornings. For those meeting in person, we will be in the old social hall of the church building (located on the first floor). If participating in person, please come with a mask and follow the COVID-19 Safety Guidelines for Sunday School: <http://www.sprucc.org/news-a-events/news.html#COVID19Precautions>.

You can also participate in the Wired Word virtually by Zoom on your computer or smart device at:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/86089807220?pwd=eStWa0ZZK0hOTVdwU0pjZlMrdk5ydz09>

or by telephone (land line or cell phone) by calling: 1-301-715-8592

Meeting ID: 860 8980 7220

Passcode: 195152

Wired Word Class is cancelled for Nov 29

All Sunday School Classes, including the Wired Word, are cancelled for Dec 27 & Jan 3

To subscribe or unsubscribe for the free weekly mailing of The Wired Word student handout, please contact the church office at Office@sprucc.org.



Tale of America's First All-Black High School Rowing Team Inspires Hope for Healing Personal Wounds and Relationships

The Wired Word for the Week of November 15, 2020

In the News

The recent release of the documentary, *A Most Beautiful Thing*, narrated by rapper Common, has caught the attention of the rowing community. The film is based on the award-winning autobiographical book, *Suga Water: A Memoir*, soon to be re-released under the title, *A Most Beautiful Thing: The True Story of America's First All-Black High School Rowing Team*, by chef Arshay Cooper. He was captain of that crew when it launched in 1997 at Manley Career Academy High School on the West Side of Chicago. Decades later, Cooper would use lessons learned on the water to build relationships with unexpected partners in the Chicago Police Department (CPD).

One of Cooper's instructors, Ken Alpart, a former collegiate rower, and one of Alpart's employees at his trading company, Michael O'Gorman, a medal-winning coxswain for the U.S. national team, hatched the idea for the first all-black high school rowing team in the Windy City.

Recruiting students to try out a sport that was unfamiliar wasn't easy. Those who did sign up, lured by pizza and the promise of new shoes, hailed from violent neighborhoods, ruled by different gangs.

At the time, one out of three kids in Chicago knew someone who had been murdered, and one in three would die before their 18th birthday. Without assurance of basic safety, they battled depression, anxiety, hopelessness, anger and PTSD at higher rates than those of combat veterans.

The original Manley crew members also experienced trauma. Several had relatives who were suicidal, doing and/or dealing drugs, addicted to alcohol, neglectful, abusive, incarcerated or absent for extended periods of time. One was nine months old when his mother was murdered. Some members of the team also struggled with their own poor decisions and hardships.

Cooper's mother had been raped by her father from age 8 to 21. She came to Christ while in a recovery program. Cooper said he didn't believe in change or in God, but when he saw his mother change, he came to faith in Christ as well.

The students faced other obstacles as they thought about trying out the sport of rowing. They didn't swim. They were afraid of water. They were all from different gangs or different neighborhoods. There was no way they could row together. If they tried, by the end of the day, they thought someone would be dead.

Rowing was also seen as an overwhelmingly white sport for rich kids. Those who signed up for rowing were ridiculed and unsupported by schoolmates and relatives at first. But eventually, people cheered them because they had never seen black boys rowing a boat before.

His high school teachers told Cooper he was "a walking storm." But rowing "was able to calm the storm in a lot of us," he said. "It was beautiful."

In the neighborhood where the Manley rowers grew up, they heard the noise of police sirens, gunshots and people screaming. They didn't hear that on the water.

"When you're outside just runnin' with the guys you run with, looking for trouble every day, you're never at peace," remarked crew member Alvin Ross. "Out there on the water, that's where everything changed," he added. "Hearing the oars in the waves, the cars driving by and blowing the horns at us, cheering us on -- being out there on the water, you know, feeling at peace -- that changed a lot about us, especially about me."

Two decades later, five of the original Manley crew members decided to re-enter the Chicago Sprints, to give hope to a new generation of at-risk youth.

As they worked out together, the seed of an idea began to sprout in Cooper's mind. Although he had "never committed a crime or broken a law or was ever even suspended from school," Cooper said he had his "face pressed down on a police car dozens of times." He wondered what would happen if police officers actually knew their names and got to know them as people, not as potential threats. So Cooper suggested that they invite a group of Chicago police officers to train with them.

Cooper's proposal took some getting used to. Crew members had had their own negative experiences with law enforcement officers, and were not initially in favor of the idea. But they reasoned that if they could get together from different gangs, maybe they could do the same with the police. Maybe they could find a way to work together to serve and protect their communities. So they agreed to give it a try.

Four white Chicago police officers volunteered to join the Manley crew members. One of the Manley rowers said of them, "Once they came out of their uniforms, they was regular human beings. They was no different than anyone else on the street. We were able to relate to them ... crack jokes, have a ball. At the end of the day, they go home to a family and kids, mothers and wives, too, we just don't get the chance to see them in their element or in that light sometimes. It was cool to see that."

CPD Officer Louis "Big Lou" Green said he thought rowing together with men from the neighborhood would be a way "to help the community feel good and ... bring people together."

"These guys were in gangs," Green said, adding, "It doesn't matter where they were. It matters where they're going. Literally, we're all in the same boat."

At first, the officers were uncomfortable being on the water, but eventually developed a rhythm and chemistry with the West Side rowers. Eventually, they formed a men's eight crew together.

CPD officer Matt Roben said, "These guys are my brothers. I don't look at them as teammates any more. I look at them as family."

He called rowing together "an obvious sign, a physical sign, that police and guys from the neighborhood are physically working together. You can't miss it."

Before racing in the 2019 Chicago Sprints, they held hands in a prayer circle. In the race, they placed second. But more important than winning a medal, they all agreed, was that they were able to model "what might be possible when unlikely rivals manage to come together."

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Pulling Together: Lessons From First All-Black High School Rowing Team. *The Christian Science Monitor* The Time Is Now. *arshaycooper.com*](#)

[Q&A: Arshay Cooper Talks About America's First All-Black High School Rowing Team. *The National Book Review*](#)

[Arshay Cooper: A Most Beautiful Thing \[OC\] \(Video 1:04:42\). *Chicago Humanities Festival* A Most Beautiful Thing \(Video rated TV-MA\). *peacocktv.com*](#)

The Big Questions

1. When, if ever, have you joined a group or team whose members do not look like you or share similar cultural background or views? What motivated you to do so? What was the experience like for you?
2. What factors are needed for a group to become a team, capable of moving forward together, whether as a crew in the sport of rowing, in a congregation or denomination, or in a nation?
3. What is the most difficult obstacle you have ever had to overcome? What resources, within the Christian community, in your faith, or elsewhere, helped or hindered you in overcoming that obstacle?
4. If you had an opportunity to inspire the next generation, what would you do with that opportunity? What role might your faith play in how you used that opportunity?
5. When followers of Jesus bring people together to work for a common purpose, how should that purpose be defined? How can we best build a sense of teamwork in our own faith communities, and in the general population?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

John 6:19-21

When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going. (For context, read 6:16-21.)

After Jesus fed 5,000 men and their families with five barley loaves and two fish, he withdrew from the crowd and went up the mountain by himself to pray. Meanwhile, the disciples went down to the sea to make their way to Capernaum by boat. By this time, the sun had set and it was dark. Even though the disciples rowed together as a team, they could not prevent or stop the storm. The boat was battered by the choppy waves because the strong wind was against them.

Matthew tells us in Matthew 14:22-33 that the disciples were far from the land when Jesus came walking toward them in the wee hours of the morning. Thinking they saw a ghost, they cried out in fear.

But Jesus calmed their fears, proving that he was with them in the storm and on the sea. He was able to calm the storms within the disciples as well as literal wind and waves.

The Manley High School students initially faced many obstacles before they became the crew of a boat. They grew up in a neighborhood rife with violence, poverty, limited resources and opportunities, little support, and few positive role models. They knew nothing about the sport, except that it seemed to be reserved for rich white kids. They had never been on the water. And they worried about interacting with members of law enforcement, with whom they had had problematic relationships in the past.

The Chicago Police Department officers didn't have all the same obstacles, but, like the Manley athletes, they had little to no experience in rowing when they joined the crew. They also had to conquer their own fears and prejudices.

As the crew members all accepted the challenges and moved off the shore into the deep, they found a kind of peace in their team endeavor. Some of them said that God was the source of their peace.

Questions: Why might people initially react in fear when God "shows up" during a crisis they are experiencing? What is your greatest fear? What resources, spiritual and ordinary, do you have at your disposal to help you cope with fear?

What is the greatest storm you have faced this year? In life? Have you felt Jesus' presence with you in the storm, and if so, how has his presence manifested itself?

Ephesians 2:14-18

For [Christ Jesus] is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups [Jew and non-Jew] into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. (For context, read 2:11-22.)

Much of Paul's writing addresses how God's plan of salvation includes Gentiles (non-Jews) as well as Jews. The book of Ephesians is Exhibit #1 of that theme. Speaking to Gentiles, Paul states that they were "aliens from the commonwealth of Israel," not part of the people of God, until they were "brought near" in Christ Jesus (vv. 12-13). But now they are "no longer strangers and aliens, but ... citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God" (v. 19).

Paul stresses that Jesus doesn't only make peace between people and God, but also among people who previously were hostile to one another. Since Christ is the way to peace with God for both the Jew and the Gentile, neither is superior or inferior to the other. As someone has said, the ground is level at the foot of the cross.

Paul picked up the theme of unity when he appealed to the believers in Corinth to "be in agreement" and to have "no divisions," but to "be united in the same mind and the same purpose," not to quarrel as though they were all from different tribes with different leaders, but to remember that there is only one undivided Christ, only one person who died for us all (1 Corinthians 1:10-13).

Instead of accepting the idea that relationships between police officers and people who had not had the best experiences with law enforcement in the past must inherently be adversarial, Cooper acknowledged that people in the community need cops to work alongside them, and he was committed to do what he could to make that happen. Asking police officers to join a team with men from the neighborhoods they serve was a step toward creating peace that comes from seeing ourselves as part of one humanity rather than as aliens and strangers to each other.

Questions: Where do you see barriers, dividing walls and hostility between people today? What produces such hostility?

Why do we sometimes see division and bitter conflict among people who claim to be followers of Jesus? What should we do about that? How can we "maintain the unity of the Holy Spirit" (Ephesians 4:3)?

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken. (No context needed.)

At the first recruitment meeting at Manley High in 1997, organizer Ken Alpart told the students, "Michael Jordan wouldn't be the MVP for rowing, because in a boat of four or eight you will not notice one person, but a team. One unit. Everyone works as one." The rowers could accomplish far more by working together than they ever could alone. That is the point the writer of our text is making as well.

Hours before he went to the cross, Jesus prayed that those who believe in him would all be completely one, as he is one with God, so that the world might know and believe that God had sent him and had loved them even as God loved Jesus (John 17:20-23). Knowing the suffering that awaited him, Jesus could have focused on his own need, but he prayed for unity among his followers. He knew that they would need each other in the days to come.

Questions: How might rowing serve as a metaphor for pulling together as a nation, as a church, as friends and families? How do we "row together" when we have differences of opinion?

What kind of rewards might we gain from toiling together as a team, from standing together against a common enemy, rather than working at cross purposes?

What can we do to strengthen the ties that bind us together in our community of faith? In our nation? In our relationships with family members, friends, coworkers?

For Further Discussion

1. Discuss this, from an op-ed by Mark Wingfield, executive director of *Baptist News Global*, entitled, "[Five Challenges for the Church After This Election](#)": "Too often, the church has portrayed 'community' as a kind of forced uniformity or assumed uniformity or even homogeneity. We go to church and assume everyone else there thinks like we do, and we tend to cluster with others who look like we do. We foster community that is as shallow and superficial as a Sunday morning hello at a coffee station. True community places us in the same boat together with everyone given an oar. We've got to figure out how to row the boat without capsizing. This is a lesson the church should model. We should be handing out oars, not complaining because the boat is taking on water."

2. The poem, "And Still I Rise," by Maya Angelou, serves as a backdrop for the documentary, *A Most Beautiful Thing*. Take a moment to review and discuss the poem ([Video 2:52](#) or [print version](#)). How might the thoughts expressed in the poem relate to your own life experience and faith journey? What allusions to the Christian gospel, if any, do you see in the words of the text? How does the poem apply specifically to the experience of the African-American, and how does the poem speak more broadly to human experience in general?

3. Respond to this, from TWW team member Frank Ramirez: "I knew a guy 40 years ago who privately expressed to me some racist comments. He believed certain ethnic groups acted in certain ways.

"On the other hand, ours was an interracial church in Los Angeles, and everyone was welcome at his home for barbecues. His experience living and working and worshiping with all races meant that his behavior did not accord with some stated prejudices. I'm thinking of the parable Jesus told about the two sons, one who says he will but doesn't, one who says he won't, but does (Matthew 21:28-32).

4. Cooper's question about what might happen if police officers actually knew the names of people in the communities they serve reminded TWW team member Frank Ramirez of the time when he was in Elkhart County, Indiana. "There was much talk about witnessing against racism by marching together on MLK day (which we did)," Ramirez wrote. "I turned to the pastor from the African Methodist Episcopal church and said, 'We ought to do Vacation Bible School together.' That led to ties that have persisted for decades because people

became real to each other."

How can the church make space for people who may be suspicious of others to get to know one another as humans, neighbors, and friends?

5. Cooper told a class at a Brooklyn charter school how he once hated his mother because of her addictions, neglect and abandonment.

Suddenly the floodgates opened as students began to unload their own tales of trauma, stories of murdered relatives and friends, stories of abuse, poverty, homelessness, hunger and pain. And the tears began flowing.

"What they needed to see was a broken Arshay, a kid whose mother was a drug addict, who never said the word 'dad' a day in his life," Cooper said. That's when he decided to write his memoir, to show children that "... on the other side of that despair, on the other side of that fear, there is courage and healing and hope and the opportunity to grow," he said.

Cooper came to realize that he was most effective in his work with youth if he spoke from a place of his own brokenness.

TWW team member Jim Berger was touched by Cooper's story. "This one's got me very emotional," he wrote. "Maybe it's because Tropical Storm Eta hit Lehigh Acres yesterday and I went out there today to assess any damage. This is the first time I've been to the church office since March 20. Minimal damage, thank God. Meeting with a few elders, all of us in masks, no hugs or touches, now home and very emotional. Lee County and Lehigh are coronavirus hotspots, 25,000 cases in the county and 4,200 in Lehigh. And a positive test rate of 14.2 percent. I won't be back there until Christmas Eve when we'll resume in-person worship.

"The emotional link in ministry is important, and too many pastors ignore it," Berger noted. "We must embrace it. Until we feel with one another, weep with one another and share feelings, we cannot let go of past grief. As a retired pastor, this pandemic has forced me to feel the many griefs I have not grieved through 45 years of being the strong one. Now, I'm weak. Perhaps that's why I connect with the rowers and the police officers."

Theologian [Henri Nouwen](#) wrote: "Nobody escapes being wounded. We all are wounded people, whether physically, emotionally, mentally or spiritually. The main question is not 'How can we hide our wounds?' so we don't have to be embarrassed, but 'How can we put our woundedness in the service of others?' When our wounds cease to be a source of shame, and become a source of healing, we have become wounded healers.

"Jesus is God's wounded healer: through his wounds we are healed," Nouwen added. "Jesus' suffering and death brought joy and life. His humiliation brought glory; his rejection brought a community of love. As followers of Jesus we can also allow our wounds to bring healing to others."

What role has brokenness and healing played in your life? Have you been touched by a wounded healer, and if so, how? Have you found that you have been able to touch others from a place of brokenness? If so, how has that experience affected you?

6. Comment on these remarks from Uriah Hall, a top-10 Ultimate Fighting Championship competitor, to the Manley rowers in their training for the Chicago Sprints:

"Now you get an opportunity to inspire the next generation. What are you going to do with it?"

"Pain is temporary. ... When your want becomes a must, nothing can stop that."

7. React to this, from one of the Manley crew members, reflecting on how difficult it is for many people living in poverty to imagine a brighter future: "You can't be what you can't see."

8. If you could go back in time, what would you say to your 13-year-old self?

Responding to the News

1. "Leave the boathouse better than you found it, which to me means, how do you leave your school, your work, your company better than you found it?" Cooper said. "How do you leave the world better than you found it?" Perhaps this can serve as a metaphor for how we should live in every aspect of our lives. Brainstorm how the idea of leaving the world better than we found it ties in to the mission of your church and into your personal goals as a follower of Jesus. Be specific.

2. You may find the hymn "[God of Love, We've Known Division](#)" useful as you pray for unity of heart and mind.

Prayer suggested by 1 Peter 3:8; Colossians 3:12-15; Romans 15:5-6

Unite us, O God, in perfect harmony of spirit, sympathy and love for one another. Give us tender hearts and humble minds. Help us to choose to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, meekness and patience. As you have forgiven us, give us grace to forgive each other. May the peace of Christ, to which we were called in one body, rule in our relationships, as we glorify you with one voice. Amen.

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