

This Train

Right from the start, the Jewish and Christian faiths have always consisted of two streams, or perhaps, if you like, two types of railways that carry the truth of our faith.

The first and most apparent and most visible is very much like a train riding on tracks made of gleaming steel.

The train cars are newly upholstered, well stocked with food, and bustling about are nicely uniformed employees keeping everything in good working order.

The church riding on these rails is made up of rules and laws and clergy.

It's primary emphasis is on looking after those already on board and making sure the train is well oiled, well maintained.

It's the train of the 10 Commandments and the many rules and regulations our Jewish brothers and sisters are required to follow, what they and we call The Law.

It's the train of our Christian creeds and liturgies and disciplines.

It is, in short the brick and mortar, priest and vestry, pledge card totting, roof repairing, stay within the budget, here comes the monthly newsletter, institutional church.

And for some folks, it's the only church they know, even if they've been around church for a life time.

But there is another train that is also the church.

It doesn't have steel tracks or shiny cars.

This other church is more like the underground railroad that transported slaves from the deep south to the north in the 1800s.

It's not made out of steel, but out of human flesh.

It exists in people's homes and out on the streets, it is spoken of softly and quietly, and it is primarily concerned with those not yet within its embrace - the outsiders, the lost, the left behind.

While the above ground railroad is often given voice by priests and bishops, Pharisees and Sadducees, the underground railroad gets its voice from the prophets like Isaiah and Micah and Jeremiah and John the Baptist.

And the underground church continues to speak today.

The underground church gets its voice from so many of you sitting in these pews, who go about quietly doing the work of the Spirit - whether that work is caring for aging parents or troubled youngsters, bringing dry blankets to those living in the park, or working to change the structures in our society that oppress and dehumanize, or just dropping by to see someone who doesn't get out that much anymore.

These two forms of church, the institutional and the Spirit-driven, are intended to dance forward hand in hand, arm in arm, but all too often through our history, the institution, with its law and order, seems to suffocate the freedom loving, uninhibited, go anywhere at any time Spirit, and when that happens, the Spirit, which will not be silenced, breaks out and begins to shake things up.

We hear it this morning in Isaiah.

Listen to Isaiah again, but now to a more streetwise translation:

"Shout! A full-throated shout!

Tell my people what's wrong with their lives!

They're busy, busy, busy at worship,
and love studying all about me.
To all appearances they're a nation of right-living people—
law-abiding, God-honoring.
They ask me, 'What's the right thing to do?'
and love having me on their side.
But they also complain,
'Why do we fast and you don't look our way?
Why do we humble ourselves and you don't even notice?'

"Well, here's why:

"The bottom line on your 'fast days' is profit.
You drive your employees much too hard.
You fast, but at the same time you bicker and fight.
You fast, but you swing a mean fist.

Do you think this is the kind of fast day I'm after:
a day to show off humility?

"This is the kind of fast day I'm after:
to break the chains of injustice,
get rid of exploitation in the workplace,
free the oppressed,
cancel debts.

What I'm interested in seeing you do is:
sharing your food with the hungry,
inviting the homeless poor into your homes,
putting clothes on the shivering ill-clad. Is. 58:1-9 (The Message Tr).

Much of the ministry of Jesus, like that of the prophets, rides on the
underground railroad.

"The sabbath is made for people, not people for the sabbath," Jesus
says, as his friends eat corn on the holy day, as he heals the withered

hand of a man on the holy day, or straightens the bent back of a woman on the holy day.

"Let the children come to me, for it is to such as these that the Kingdom of Heaven belongs," Jesus says, wiping away a cultural given that says children are not even full human beings, that children should be seen and not heard.

"You are the light of the world," Jesus says, "so shine, bring out all the God colors in the world and shine!"

"Shine before others, so as you open up to others, others will open up to God" Jesus says, because Jesus knows intimately the wild Spirit of God, a Spirit that is not captured by rules, is not limited by what we conceive to be holy or proper or prudent, but it is that wild Spirit that animates the underground church.

And yet, lest we think that it's time to dismantle the church buildings, to kick out the bishops and priests, to dissolve the vestries, here in today's gospel lesson, Jesus says to us, not so fast...

Because in Jesus, we usually don't get either/or; in Jesus it's very often both/and.

And so today we get the message that the institutional church and the wild Spirit of the underground church are inseparable, like lovers with arms and legs wrapped around each other, distinct, yet intimately joined.

Perhaps that's one reason why Jesus tells us he has not come to overthrow the law but to fulfill it.

Our Lord knows we need the structure, the steel, the organization, the law, yes, even the priests and the bishops, because we human folk need structure or we too often collapse into anarchy.

And yet, the structure, for all of its needfulness, is not the heart of it
- the structure is not the essence.

The heart - the essence - is always the underground church - always
the cry for each other, the searching for the lost.

We need the structure, that's for sure, but we are lost if we conclude
that the structure is all we need.

We need the elusive, that just out of reach Spirit of God - which can
be likened to many things, but never pinned down.

The Spirit of God is like a treasure found buried, and the finder immedi-
ately sells everything to have it.

The Spirit of God is like a cranky, sleepy neighbor who's got the loaf of
bread you need to feed your late arriving guest, and maybe he'll give it
to you if you keep pounding on his door.

The Spirit of God is like the corrupt judge faced with a pestering old
woman, or the Spirit of God is like the rich householder who invites first
the best people, and when they are too busy because of their stocks
and bonds and sex lives and country clubs, well, he hauls in the riff-raff
from every alley and sidewalk until his banquet hall is filled.....

The Spirit of God can be likened to many things, but it can never be
pinned down.

The institution, on the other hand, is easier to get our heads around.

We can read the rules.

We are good at drawing lines and setting limits - "this far, and no far-
ther," we say.

“God knows we need justice, ..., judgments must be made,..., our nature requires it.

But the troubling thing is, God’s nature doesn’t.

We need the law, but God doesn’t.

God is not in the game of harnessing fear and anger, and trying to turn them into fairness.

The law says that everyone should get what they deserve, but God already knows what we deserve with terrible precision, and he wants us to have more than that.

He sees that we need to do justice to each other, but he wants to give us mercy.

He wants **deserving** to be swamped by **love**.

So if you want to live next door to God, you can’t do it just by being law abiding.

You have to try, again, to **be** like him, to **do** what he does....” Spufford, Unapologetic, 121-22 (paraphrased).

So here comes Jesus, not overthrowing, but fulfilling the law.

Fulfilling it by getting behind it, under it, within it, to the very heart-beat of the law: to the intent of the law; to the Spirit of the law.

And he gives us permission to do the same.

Which is why Jesus can eat and heal on the sabbath — because the purpose of the sabbath is to create a human society that is just and merciful; by setting aside a day each week for rest and refreshment, so you and I might be restored.

And in a country where the minimum wage is far below what it was 40 years ago, making working people work ever harder only to keep falling behind, honoring the sabbath rest also means working for economic justice, economic fairness.

It's why children can be honored, because God is found most often in innocence and vulnerability; in need and in compassion.

Yet, just ask Fane about her visits to Kakaako Park this week, finding so many little ones sleeping on bare concrete sidewalks, not even a sheet separating them from the cold stone that is their bed.

And so we are called to be faithful not only in our attendance at the Mass, not only to receive regularly the sacraments, not only to pay attention to the needs of church buildings and grounds, but we are also called to live life in the way Jesus lives it.

Every person Jesus comes face to face with is, for that time, it seems, the only person in the world.

Jesus meets and attends to and accepts people as people - no matter their class or race or the last time they took a bath.

Jesus meets and attends to and accepts people as people - no matter that he was just caught in the very act of adultery, no matter that she is covered with sores, no matter that he is the newest immigrant appearing on our shores with nothing but a hungry stomach.

Jesus invites us to make his way of life our way of life, because Jesus gives us a new way to live.

"He gives us a new way to deal with offenders - by forgiving them.

He gives us a new way to deal with violence - by suffering.

He gives us a new way to deal with money - by sharing it.

He gives us a new way of relating to one another - by serving one another." Haueraus, Matthew, 67 (paraphrased).

When we live in this new way, we become salt to a world desperately seeking a taste of the Living God.

So have salt in yourselves, and be at peace.

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