

Trains

Right from the start, the Jewish and Christian faiths have always consisted of two streams.

Think of it as two types of railways that carry the truth of our faith.

The first is like a train riding on tracks of gleaming steel.

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

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

It's primary focus is on those already on board and making sure the train is well maintained.

It's the train of the 10 Commandments and the rules and regulations our Jewish brothers and sisters are required to follow, what is called: 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 toting, roof repairing, stay within the budget, here comes the monthly newsletter, institutional church.

And for many, it's the only church they know.

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's spoken of softly and its primary concern is with those not yet within its embrace - the least, the lost, and 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 John the Baptist.

That underground church continues to speak today.

The underground church is heard in the voice of so many of you who go about quietly doing the work of the Spirit.

Whether that's making breakfast bentos on Saturday morning or helping out at Wallyhouse.

Whether it's caring for aging parents or troubled youngsters, or working to change the structures in our society that oppress and dehumanize.

These two forms of church, the institutional and the Spirit-driven, are intended to dance together, arm in arm, but all too often, the institution, with its' law and order, seems to suffocate the freedom loving, uninhibited Spirit.

But when that happens, the Spirit, who will not be silenced, breaks out and begins to shake things up.

We hear it this morning in Isaiah.

Listen to him again, but from 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 every appearance, they’re a nation of right living people.

Law abiding, God honoring and obedient.

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:

You drive your employees much too hard.

You fast, but bicker and fight while doing so.

You swing a mean fist.

I don't want a show of your humility!

Fast like this.

By breaking the chains of injustice.

Getting rid of exploitation.

Freeing the oppressed.

Canceling debt. 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, on the holy day, his friends eat corn.

As he heals the withered hand of a man.

As he straightens the bent back of a woman.

"You are the light of the world," Jesus says.

"So shine, and bring out each and every God color in the world!"
Mt 5:14.

Jesus knows intimately the wild Spirit of God.

A Spirit that's not captured by rules, nor limited by our notions of holiness.

That wild Spirit is constantly giving life to the underground church.

And yet, lest we think that it's time to dismantle the institution, to kick out the bishops, to dissolve the vestries, today's gospel says, "not so fast."

Because in Jesus, it's usually not either/or, it's usually both/and.

Jesus insists that the institutional church and the wild Spirit of the underground church are inseparable.

Like lovers, tangled up in each other's arms.

Distinct, yet intimately joined.

Is that why Jesus tells us he's not come to overthrow the law, but to fulfill it?

Our Lord knows we need structure, or we will collapse into anarchy.

But the structure is not the heart of it.

The heart of it is the spirit of God.

A spirit that can't be defined.

It can only be analogized.

And so, the Spirit of God is like a treasure found buried, and the finder sells everything to have it.

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

The Spirit is like the rich man who invites only the best people, but they're too busy with their stocks and sex lives and country clubs, so he hauls in the riff-raff from every back alley until his banquet hall is filled.

The Spirit cannot be defined.

The institution can be.

We read the rules.

We draw lines and set limits.

We need the law, but God doesn't.

"The law says that everyone should get what they deserve.

But God already knows (with terrible precision), what we deserve, and she wants us to have more than that.

God knows we want just desserts, but God wants to hand out mercy.

God replaces "deserving" – with undeserved love.

So if you want to live in God's neighborhood, you can't just be law abiding.

You gotta be like him, and do what he does." Spufford, Unapologetic, 21/22 (paraphrased).

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

By getting behind it.

Diving into the intent of the law.

Into the Spirit of the law.

Giving us permission to do the same.

Which is why Jesus eats and heals on the sabbath.

Because the Law's purpose is to create a human society that is just, kind and merciful.

So, in a country where the minimum wage cannot meet minimum needs, honoring the sabbath also means demanding a livable wage.

When housing costs exceed ordinary folks ability to pay, honoring the sabbath means fighting for affordable homes.

When children go to bed hungry, honoring the sabbath means finding ways to feed them.

Because we are called to be faithful not only by attending the Mass, not only by receiving regularly the sacraments, but the faithful life is the life lived as Jesus lives it.

Seeing in every person, no matter their circumstance, the very face of the Living God.

Jesus welcomes people as people - no matter their class or race or the last time they took a bath.

Jesus welcomes people as people - even the one who's caught in the very act of adultery, even the one who's covered in sores, even the newest immigrant, with nothing to offer but a hungry belly.

Jesus invites us to make his way of life – our way of life.

“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 each another - by serving each other.” Haueraus, Matthew, 67 (paraphrased).

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

We become light to a world too often resigned to darkness.

So jump on the underground train!

Follow Jesus!

Embrace the Spirit!

Shine!

+amen