

THE TRAIN ROCKED: A PILGRIMAGE TO JOY

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Psalm 16: 1-2 & 9-11

Mark Dunn
Matt. 8: 23-27

On June the 23rd of this year at the exact time of 3:45 pm, my wife Diana and I boarded a train with eighteen of our youth (P.F.ers) for a twenty-four hour ride to Hartford, Conn. This morning I feel that I can confess to them and to you that I looked forward to that experience with some degree of anxiety and a great degree of excitement. I mean all of this in a positive sense.

My wife Diana, who is certainly aware of my weaknesses, gave me two instructions as we were about to arrive at the train station. First; "Please do not embarrass your son or me by being bossy." The second instruction related to the first: "Please try very hard not to be a "fuddy-duddy and a kill-joy."

As you the congregation might guess, the sermon this morning is a reflection on these travels with our youth. I want to dedicate this sermon to the P.F.ers who braved that excursion, to the other youth of the church and to the young at heart. As I reflected on that experience, a couple of words came to mind that presents a message to all of us.

I. PILGRIMAGE

The first word that came to mind was the word pilgrimage. When we travel by whatever mode, the purpose is travel from where you are to your destination. We sometimes speak of the Christian life as a pilgrimage. Some time ago it was fashionable to put a little sign on your desk or in your work area that read: "Please be patient with me. God is not finished with me yet." I wish it was still popular for it reminds us to be about the business of growing in Christ. The point is that the imagery is that we are traveling toward a goal. That goal is the goal of God's presence. However, in our traveling toward that goal, we can be burdened down with too much baggage.

A. Have you ever been on a trip and not long into your journey, you realized you have too much baggage. I don't know for certain but I think the youth felt they, too, had too much baggage. We certainly realized this when we learned that we couldn't check our baggage at the Milwaukee station and there was not enough time to check the baggage in Chicago. So, we had to carry suitcases, skateboards, boomboxes, sleeping bags and squirt-bottles in our arms.

As for myself, I planned to utilize some of the travel time to work on a theology paper for my doctoral studies. Therefore, I had a briefcase packed so tight with books that when you picked it up it appeared to be glued to the floor.

As Christians on pilgrimage, we can be carrying around too much baggage. Probably, the greatest temptation is to carry around too much of the material. I know we ministers love to pound the pulpit on this one and so I promise to keep this point short. Because we own so many material things and have to utilize so much time maintaining them, we have little or no time for God and the spiritual life.

On my day-off this week, I commented to Diana that I felt that I needed to go up to Holy Hill to mediate for most of the day. She strongly encouraged me to do

so. Instead, I did the practical thing. I talked my son into helping me wash and wax the car. No wonder Jesus advised us, "Do not lay up treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume.....but lay up.....treasures in heaven." (Matt.6:20)

A professor of mine at CTS said that primitive people of centuries ago were very spiritually sophisticated. But with the coming of modern times, this sophistication has deteriorated. He said that it is our focus on the material that has encouraged this decline.

Secondly, we carry around the wrong kind of baggage. I can't tell you of how many long distance trips to Georgia we've made in which we lugged some item the entire trip, which wasn't needed. We do this often in our Christian pilgrimage. The list of these items can be numbered as the stars. Such items as "false guilt" which I will talk about next Sunday. Anger is another piece of baggage in which we burden ourselves

A friend of mine shared a story of a man who had 20 dollars stolen from him during his young adult years. As this man traveled around the southeast, he was always looking for the thief. My friend told of visiting the man when he was ninety years of age. He was weak, sick and frail. But as he listened to him reminisce about his life, the man mentioned the thief who stole his 20 dollars. He still wanted revenge. Most of his life he carried the weight of rage.

B. Carrying around excess baggage and the wrong kind of baggage can rob us of the joy of life and living. Alcibiades, who was one of Socrates' students, had traveled much, was intelligent, but most unhappy. Someone asked why this gifted student was so unhappy? Socrates said it was "Because wherever he goes Alcibiades takes himself with him."

II EXPERIENCE

A second word that stood out for me as a result of our travels is the word experience. Our pilgrimage to Dartmouth, Massachusetts, was an experience which we will not soon forget. The train ride itself was an experience, much less all the exciting things that happened between our starting point and the destination.

A. Experiences. I thought I would just share a few that stand out in my mind. First, was the hundred yard dash back to the train to search for a lost wallet while in the Chicago terminal. Second, scrambling down a long flight of stairs with baggage in hand, only to have to climb up another long flight of stairs on the other side to catch our next train which was being held for us. Third, experiencing what it is like to be baptised by the contents of a spray bottle. Since I put water on people, they just wanted to return the favor.

The fourth experience is going to take a little more explaining. It was about 11:00 at night and I was asleep as we made our return trip to Milwaukee. It was announced that at this stop in Albany, New York, we would be in the station for some time to make adjustments. Well, the train had been stopped for some time and many of the youth were getting bored just sitting. One of our youth decided to make a quick run into the terminal to purchase a magazine. He saw that I was asleep and so rather than wake The Rev. (being kind to his minister), he decided to step off the train to make his purchase. Everything went as planned until the train started to leave the station.

Next thing I knew I was being awakened by an excited teenager who informed me that one of them was off the train and we were leaving. I read for your hearing a moment ago where Jesus was awakened as their ship was being "swamped by the waves." He very calmly made a profound statement about the weakness of their faith and then handled the crisis situation. I did make a profound statement.

Two words just gushed out of my mouth before I could stop them. You would have been proud of that first word for it was most theological--"Holy." The next word, however, reflected my rural barnyard background. Do you remember the instructions to be careful not to be a fuddy-duddy? Thankfully, we were informed that the train was not leaving the station and so there was nothing to get excited about.

The last experience includes all of them, as well as all the youth in our Church. I experienced the spirit of our youth. I experienced their zest and energy for life. I experienced their joy they seem to have in just being together. This inspired me.

B. Divine providence. That's the way it is with life's experiences. If we would just let them speak to us, they will inspire and inform. Business wants employees that they know have been inspired and informed by experience.

We could move a step further and talk about experiences theologically. Charles Gerkin in his book "Crisis Experience in Modern Life" said that, "Since God is at work seeking to transform present existence, our openness to the in-breaking of the new reality is crucial..." (P.320) In other words, it is important that we be perceptive to God's breaking into our lives through our experiences. Moses heard the voice of God at the burning bush because he was open to God breaking into his life through his experiences.

In order for us to discover God's disclosures, Gerkin says we have to tend to our experiences as we would cultivate a garden. We break open the soil of the experience to discover the message that is underneath. We need to reminisce time and time again.

Since our pilgrimage on the train, I have turned the soil of those experiences over and over in my mind. If I am honest with myself, when I left here with you on the 23rd I was a little bit of a "fuddy-duddy--ok, a whole lot. Today, I would like to think that I am a little more flexible and open to transformation because of your enthusiasm and joy. I feel like David when he wrote in the Psalm: "Thou dost show me the path of life; in thy presence there is fullness of joy." Through our youth, God has shown me a "path of life."

To all of the youth in our church, your presence gives hope that the church will continue to be a vital part in God's kingdom building. For the young at heart, we need to remember that "to see God in everything makes life the greatest adventure there is."

CONCLUSION

The well-known rabbi Harold Kushner shared a story in one of his books of an eighty-five year old woman from the hills of Kentucky. She was asked how she would live her life if she had a chance to live it over again. Her answer: "I would dare to make more mistakes next time. I would relax. I would be sillier, I would

take fewer things seriously.....I would eat more ice cream and less beans. I would perhaps have more actual troubles but fewer imaginary ones. You see, I'm one of those people who lived seriously and sanely hour after hour, day after day. I've been one of those persons who never went anyplace without a thermometer, a hot water bottle, a raincoat, and a parachute. If I had it to do again, I'd travel lighter." (P.109)

If I ever have the opportunity to go on a pilgrimage with our youth again or with any of you, I don't plan to take a brief case filled with books. This is what I plan to carry: a "squirt bottle." Amen.