

Sermons at Saint Paul's

Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World

The Seventh Sunday of Easter/May 17, 2015

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On Tuesday night an Amtrak commuter train derailed in Port Richmond killing eight. The train was traveling more than double the speed limit at the time. We do not yet know the cause. It reminded me of a rail disaster in Spain a couple of years ago when a train in Santiago de Compostella derailed while traveling 179 kilometers per hour on track that had a speed limit of 80 kph. In that case we know the engineer was distracted by being on the telephone with operators of the rail line and did not apply the brakes in time. In both cases, the trains were not equipped with “positive train control” that would automatically brake the train if it was going too fast.

For a train to move there is always a rocking motion. Mechanical engineers define the tolerances within which the cars may safely sway. They call this measure the “kinetic envelope.” If the cars’ sway exceeds the allowances of this envelope they will likely derail which is what happened this week.

Likewise in a parish there must be some sway or stress, otherwise there would be no movement, no life, no adventure. We call this good stress. Sometimes we talk of “pushing the envelope.” We pace our lives as fast as we can. We get distracted and forget to pay attention to our own needs and those of others. We try to do as much as possible and still remain standing. Not everyone stays on track.

The Acts of the Apostles describes the derailing of the discipleship community. Judas who betrayed Jesus “turned aside to go to his own place.” Judas exceeded the tolerances of unity and broke away. He went off the rails one might say. Now we find the disciples sorting through the wreckage. They elect Matthias to take Judas’ place in the ministry. They reconstitute the

handful of disciples whose mission is to follow Jesus, to stay within the envelope of his peace and unity. Those are the tolerances that give life. What mechanical engineers call a kinetic envelope we might think of as a “Christic” envelope. If we stay within the presence of the Son of God we stay on track. Or as First John declares, “Whoever has the Son has life.”

The Bible lessons show us this small, fragile community of disciples embarking on a new adventure. The only thing they have that promises any possibility of success is the presence of God, if they can stay within that Christic envelope and not turn aside. Jesus prays for his followers concluding, “so I have sent them into the world.” There is the adventure. They are to challenge worldly conflict with peace, disunity with oneness, neglect with compassion. There is a lot of “sway” and stress to this adventure. To enter into conflict with a word of peace is not a path to popularity, nor is looking for unity where sides are polarized. To shine a light on neglect, on homelessness and hunger for instance, and demand compassion, is going to cause some stress. Jesus observes in his prayer that “the world has hated them.” To use railroad imagery, those train cars are rocking!

Jesus’ prayer then is not to get them out of this, but to protect them from the evil one. The adventure is still on. But keep them in the Christic envelope, in the presence of the Son of God. Help them stay within the tolerances of unity, peace and compassion, and not to turn aside. Keep them on track. Jesus prays that we may be one as God the Son and God the Father are one. When we remain in communion with him, enveloped by unifying love, then no matter what happens we will be protected by that compassion which is stronger than death.

Now let me say a few words about Saint Paul’s Church in our 160th year. Like the earliest disciples we are on an adventure! For us it all began at a railroad station, in a meeting room above what is now Chestnut Hill East before any church building existed. We have been following the track of discipleship that has been laid down for us over many generations. Sometimes we have built new track over new terrain. Occasionally, like the tiny band of disciples, it may seem we are too small, perhaps too fragile, to undertake this adventure that has been set before us. Our facilities are too big, our resources

too small. How can we pull it all into the future? We are tempted toward disunity, to turn aside. But within the envelope of God's love we are not insignificant, but full of joy and promise. One thinks of the children's story of the little engine that could: "I think I can, I think I can, I think I can" chugged the tiny engine as it pulled its cargo over the mountain.

The power of the Holy Spirit is our engine. The love of God is our fuel. And the presence of Jesus is our kinetic, or Christic, envelope whose tolerances are peace, unity and compassion. If we stay within them we will stay on track. As a parish we are in it for the long haul. This means we are not going to stop this adventure or cut it short. As long as we live within the presence of Christ the adventure continues! The Christic envelope that protects us from derailment is open. All are invited to live and move and have their being within its tolerances that lead to life.

Today is our second rector's birthday. William Hobart Hare was born on May 17, 1838. Ten years after leaving Saint Paul's he became bishop to the great Sioux Nation. In 1874 he wrote to his sister, "I am on my way to the Santee Mission and write from a wayside ranch where I have had to lay by for a few hours a little indisposed. What with a prolonged term of excessive heat and drouth which tried human nature sorely and blighted the Indians' hope of fair crops... I should utterly faint by the way, but that faith can discover in this country as well as in Palestine the footprints of a weary Lord."

Here, Bishop Hare keeps himself within the envelope of Christ's presence. It sustains him even though he needs to lay by for a few hours. He knows how to pace himself to stay on track, and gives us as a community a good example. He stays within the tolerances of compassion, unity and peace acknowledging concern for the wellbeing of the Indians he is to serve as well as of himself. These are the tolerances of a Christic envelope that, like the kinetic envelope of a railroad train, keep us on track. Our journey as a community like that of Bishop Hare is for the long haul sometimes wearying, other times complete with Christ's joy. Jesus has sent us into the world, on an adventure, that in the end if we do not turn aside brings us into the fullness of his love.

Amen.