

NEW OCCASIONS TEACH NEW DUTIES

August 28, 2011

Mine was O-27 gauge. It had a figure 8 track, plastic trestles and a papier-mâché tunnel. There was even a train station that had a real mechanical whistle inside of its tin shell, and the engine chugged smoke. Who else has a train set? Jack, you do. A bunch of hands.

Well, like you, I loved trains, especially those trains that chug real smoke. I loved trains...and so did Everett. Everett and Lucille were my parent's longest couple friends, and they drove Studebakers until they didn't make them anymore. Everett was a welder by trade, but the job he loved was his night job and weekend job because, on nights and weekends, Everett worked at a miniature golf course; a golf course that sat right in front of a steel mill for Laclede Steel. And there he was the engineer for a real steam, quarter-scale train that circled the golf course. Nights and weekends Everett ran that train, and there was no bigger treat for me than going to that golf course and riding the train.

One evening we were there late and my family and Everett were the only ones left. And as we were getting ready to get in our cars, a switch engine that was coming our direction out of the steel mill stopped. And the engineer said to Dad, *Would he like a ride?* pointing at me. Dad said: *I don't know, but he can if he wants.* And so the engineer asked me: *Do you want a ride?* And I really wanted to say yes, but I was afraid. I wimped out. I said no. I didn't go.

So, friends, have you ever wimped out like that? Has apprehension ever canceled adventure for you? Have you ever let reluctance conquer risk? Has protection ever undone purpose? Do you let safety trump significance...fear conquer faith?

Now, I have to say that that decision wasn't a momentous one for me: I don't think it changed the course of my life. But it was a memorable one and now, fifty years later, I still feel the sting of regret because I didn't get to ride in that real train engine.

For Moses, it wasn't a train engineer who faced him with a choice; it was a burning bush. Though Moses had been born an Israelite, he had the amazing fortune of growing up in Pharaoh's palace. And so he was conflicted. Did he belong to the court of Egypt, or did he belong to the people of Israel? And that conflict caused him to run for his life when he slaughtered an Egyptian soldier one day to protect an Israelite. He fled that tragic crucible of Israel's slavery. He left it behind to save his life and to spare himself the conflict. He moved to Midian, and there, in Midian, he married the daughter of the town priest. And he settled into a comfortable place in his father-in-law's lucrative livestock business.

And there in Midian, tending the flocks, Moses' memory of his people was fading and the fire of his passion for justice had become nothing more than cooling embers. But then a bush blazed aflame in front of him, and that bush called his name:

Take off your shoes, the voice said. ***For this is holy ground!*** And then it said: ***I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and a broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, and the***

Hittites, and the Amorites, and the Perizzites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me, said this voice. I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.

It was a great idea that this bush had, until the bush got to that last sentence: ***I will send YOU to Pharaoh.*** That was the last thing that Moses wanted. He was happy. He was comfortable. He was secure. He was settled. He was not going to go, so he found some excuses. He said: *Oh, come on. Who am I, that I should do this? I'm just a poor shepherd.* And the answer that came was: ***I am with you. You're not a nobody, Moses. You're a somebody, because you belong to God!*** And then Moses said: *Well, okay, that's who I am, but who are you? What's your name?* And the answer came: ***I AM WHO I AM!***, an answer of pure freedom and pure strength.

Well, fortunately, Moses wasn't like me, because Moses went. Moses went to Egypt. He was uncertain, and he was reluctant, and he was filled with fear and trembling. But, because he went, a mediocre shepherd who lived off of the good fortune of his more famous father-in-law became the greatest pioneer of liberty and law the world has ever known. That happened because Moses listened. That happened because Moses let go of yesterday. That happened because Moses decided to choose God.

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Jesus was making the most difficult speech of His whole life, and He was making it to His closest friends. As Matthew describes it:

From that time on, Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

Those words caught in Jesus' throat, and His tongue stuck to the roof of His mouth as he spoke them. Jesus dreaded it. He was afraid. And Peter: well, he was no help, because Peter wanted things to stay the same. He wanted to protect his Lord. And so he said: ***No, this shall never happen to You. I love this vagabond life of preaching, and teaching, and healing with You, Jesus. God forbid it, Lord!*** said Peter. And Peter grabbed Jesus and tried to shake some sense into Him.

But Jesus resisted, and He looked at Peter and He said: ***Get behind me, Satan! You're a stumbling block for me; for you are setting your mind on earthly things not on divine things.***

Get behind me, Satan! Jesus didn't mean that Peter was evil. Jesus simply meant that Peter was the tempter. Peter was tempting Jesus to turn around and to give up on His destiny...to stay away from Jerusalem...to play it safe. And the truth, of course, is that Jesus didn't want to be crucified any more than Peter wanted Him to be crucified. You know the prayer in Gethsemane:

My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not what I want but what You want.

The danger, you see, in Peter is not that he opposed Jesus; it's that he reflected Jesus. He gave voice to Jesus' greatest fear.

Yet Jesus wasn't like me. Jesus went to Jerusalem. He was uncertain. He was reluctant, and He was filled with fear and trembling. And because He did, an itinerant, rustic, self-taught preacher and prophet became the Savior of the world and the Master of a redeemed and redeeming humanity. That happened because Jesus listened. It happened because Jesus let go of yesterday. It happened because He decided to take up His cross and to choose God.

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There is a new occasion in this season, this year 2011, for the church: not just for Union Church, but for the whole church. The church didn't create it, but we're caught up in it. And the occasion is a sea change (words that you're going to come to know very well), a sea change of reorientation and decline. In this new occasion for the church – because it's not an occasion of great growth and triumph – there is a lot of blame that goes around. Why are things not like they used to be? And the easiest target to blame in that question is the leaders. It's the leaders' fault. It's the preachers' fault. The sermons are too long, you know, and they're too boring (don't go to sleep!). The music...it's so yesterday. Friendliness...well, you know, we're pretty stuffy, and we only like the people who we know. We have all kinds of things to say about that. And this week I learned that, across the board, the decline in the church is twice as great among those who do not have a college degree as it is among those who do. It's not a comforting fact, but it's interesting, isn't it?

This October we are going to be blessed to have Tony Robinson come and join us here at Union Church for a weekend: the 29th and 30th of October. Tony is a UCC minister and a consultant who, I think, is tremendously insightful and incredibly helpful. He's written a book titled *Changing the Conversation* that a bunch of us have been reading and that's available to any of you to read as well. And, in his book, Tony Robinson says pretty clearly that Christendom is over. Christendom: that's the great Constantinian synthesis that lasted seventeen hundred years. When Emperor Constantine made the Christian faith the official religion of the Roman Empire is when it began, and now, says Robinson, it has come to an end. This synthesis between church and state is done, and we can see that because, if you watch and listen to society, society no longer calls on the church to bless it or to give it legitimacy. Society just doesn't need the church in that way anymore. The only role that society has for the church these days is charity and benevolence, especially when public sentiment for social programs is drying up. The church should fill that gap but, otherwise, the church has no real place in today's society.

So what are we to do – we who love the church, and belong to it, and support it – what are we to do? Well, one answer is we should make some changes. We should offer up some technical changes: easy things to get our arms around and to accomplish, like when visitors come to see us we ought to give them bread or cookies. And we should have greeters and welcomers at every door to make sure people are welcomed here and know that we want them to come. We do those things.

Maybe we should have screens in worship and project the words instead of using paper and books. Some churches do that; we don't. Maybe we need a praise band and worship songs instead of an organ and hymns. We used a praise song this morning and Kathy, you helped us

with *Holy Ground*. Maybe we should install a cappuccino bar. Some places have. The point is to become a one-stop, religious shop so we can get all our needs met at this one place.

Or, maybe we should think about (and we already have) what some churches have already done: changing our name. That's a sore subject. In St. Louis last week, I observed a whole bunch of churches – it must be an infection there – that have changed their names. The Hanley Road Baptist Church now calls itself *The Journey*. The Rock Hill Baptist Church is *The Rock Church*. The Gospel Assembly (this is a great name) is now Enjoy Church. Yes, that's its name! And best of all, the Craig Road Baptist Church is now calls itself (are you ready?) *Have Bible Will Travel*.

Those are technical changes, and none of it makes a difference, you see, unless it reflects and invites us into a new reality. Tony Robinson tells us that new realities come not with technical changes – not with screens or paper or forms of music or cookies or bread – but with adaptive change. And one of the adaptive changes he invites us to consider is a change from our understanding of the church; a basic understanding that moves away from the church as a place where you belong as a member to a place where you live as a disciple. It's a different understanding. It's not a place where your name's on a roll, but it's a place where you're part of a community that lives the Spirit of Christ. An adaptive change is understanding the church as a community of active believers who love Jesus and who strive to make everyday alive with His love in this world. Barbara Brown Taylor, a contemporary theologian, writes:

In a life of faith, so conceived, God's grace is not simply the infinite supply of divine forgiveness on which hopeless sinners depend. No, grace is also the mysterious strength God lends human beings who commit themselves to the work of transformation. It's being about the business of new life, the transformation of individuals and society...

And I would add, doing all that with the love of Christ. In adaptive change, Jesus is who we hold onto...Jesus is what does not change...and Jesus informs us (maybe this is the most important part), Jesus informs us about what must change.

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In June of 1939, Reinhold Niebuhr brought Dietrich Bonhoeffer back to New York City to Union Theological Seminary for his second visit, to serve on the faculty there. A month later, Bonhoeffer wrote to Niebuhr. This is what he wrote:

I have come to the conclusion that I made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period in our national history with the people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people... Christians in Germany will have to face the terrible alternative of either willing the defeat of their nation in order that Christian civilization may survive or willing the victory of their nation and thereby destroying civilization. I know which of these alternatives I must choose but I cannot make that choice from security.

In spite of Niebuhr's protests and persuasion to the contrary, Bonhoeffer went home to his people in July of 1939. He decided. He chose. He took up his cross. He claimed his purpose with full commitment.

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Reinhold Niebuhr hated the original words for the hymn we're going to sing at the end of this service. The first line of that hymn originally says: *Once to every man and nation, comes the moment to decide.* Niebuhr said that that's so wrong because it's not just once. It's every day that we must decide. So with a little license I've rewritten it, in Niebuhr's spirit! *Each new day in countless choices, Jesus calls us to decide.* And in countless ways we do decide...every day.

Remember what God said to Moses: *I AM WHO I AM.* God also said: *I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE.* But God never said: *I AM WHO I WAS.* God is invested in today and tomorrow, not in yesterday. And so God invites us to invest ourselves in this today and in our tomorrows.

Will we change the conversation...so that we can be changed...so that we can change the world? Will we change the conversation, not about the things out there...in the safe distance of the external world, but the things in here...in our hearts and in our lives? Will we rise to the challenge that Jesus offers us to deny ourselves, to let go of our little, multi-tasking diversions that overwhelm us and empty us of purpose?

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And we do learn new duties when we commit ourselves to the One who is the unchanging center, and anchor, and substance of our faith.

And so, with joy, Jesus invites us: deny *ourselves*, take up *our* cross, and follow Me!

Amen.

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