

June 24, 2018

Rev. Dr. Jean Halligan Vandergrift

"All Aboard!"

THE READINGS

Isaiah 61:1-3

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
² to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
³ to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.

Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus* saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

³ 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵ 'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶ 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷ 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

⁸ 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

9 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

10 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely* on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

SERMON

*The gospel train is comin', I hear it just at hand;
I hear the car wheel rumblin', and rollin' through the land.
The fare is cheap and all can go, the rich and poor are there;
No second class aboard this train, no difference in the fare.
Get on board, little children; get on board, little children;
Get on board, little children, there's room for many more.*

This spiritual, known as *The Gospel Train*, served as a code-word song by the Underground Railroad to signal to slaves the moment to escape. Later, during the Civil Rights Movement, Curtis Mayfield and The Impressions adapted it into the hit single, *People Get Ready*. **I think that this spiritual also captures the Jesus movement, when he proclaimed: "The Reign of God is near and here." Like a gospel train, something bigger than us is coming, and Jesus is inviting us to get on board.**

Through the Bible, we can track the course of the rule of God – God's train of blessing – through time. Like a presidential whistle-stop tour, the highlights of God's movement included Abraham, then Moses, and the Prophets, of which Isaiah was one. There was a pause in the prophetic tradition, after which John the Baptist took up the good news of the coming Reign and Jesus of Nazareth got on board and launched *his* ministry, preaching from Isaiah 61: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to preach good news to the poor and release to the captives." (Luke 4:16-30)

Even though "the Reign of God" is an extremely important concept in the Bible – it was Jesus' gospel and the gospel *in* him – as G.R. Beasley Murray points out, the Reign of God is "still a blur" to most people.¹ It may have sounded good to the crowds in Jesus' day

¹G.R. Beasley-Murray, "Jesus and the Kingdom of God," *Baptist Quarterly*, 1987, p. 141. Published online by Taylor and Francis, September 5, 2016.

to hear from him that God's ways were taking hold, and there was incredible anticipation when Jesus came on the scene, but his announcement about the gospel train stopping near them naturally raised a number of good questions: What does this God movement look like in reality? How will we know that it has arrived? What is its internal logic and moral core? Where is this train going, and who's on it?

The people then, like us, wanted to better understand this gospel before they got on board; they wanted more details on what would be the policy and practice of this new, divine administration. Scholars agree that the Beatitudes is Jesus' way of filling in this outline, describing and elaborating upon the Reign of God, helping people to see what otherwise was completely foreign to their imagination. Indeed, chapters 5-7 of Matthew – the nine blessings (Beatitudes) and the Sermon on the Mount – is Jesus' "Great Instruction"² for the church and serves as its charter!

Biblical commentator Eugene Boring (yes, that's his real name) points out that the Beatitudes are *not* "practical advice for successful living," nor "nine different kinds of people who go to heaven."³ The counter-cultural Beatitudes uphold *divine* values and go against common sense. Fortunately, we have a summer series of sermons to examine the Beatitudes for what the Reign of God is about. These teachings at least tell us that the Gospel Train is about blessing, poverty of spirit, longing for God's justice and righteousness, mercy, humility, consolation, peacemaking, and dealing with resistance.

Furthermore, you and I do not need to *build* this train or pull it across the rails into the future. This is *not* another project for TriCon to take on in the fall! *God* is the engineer! It is the Reign and train of God. The Spirit provides the locomotion – the fuel and energy – and Jesus is the conductor who calls us on with urgency and then extends a strong hand of welcome and love.

Without Jesus' teaching, it can be overwhelming today to select the social movements that are compatible with God's Movement and to join them. There are so many happening now, so many causes to consider, and plenty of 'trains' to board! Ought we to lend our support to movements for anti-bullying, climate justice, fair trade, pro-life or pro-choice? Are these part of the Something Bigger that God is doing? Should we join the anti-vaccination movement? Gay pride, Farm to Table, Defend Science, or the white nationalists? Times Up and Me Too want us. Is gun-control or second amendment rights calling? Claim Jesus is a movement of all sorts of Christian denominations in favor of social progress, and Black Lives Matter needs passengers.

²W.F. Albright and C.S. Mann, *Matthew* (New York: Doubleday, 1971) name the Sermon on the Mount "The Great Instruction."

³M. Eugene Boring, "The Gospel of Matthew," *The New Interpreters Bible, Vol. 8* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 177.

Jesus Christ invites us to learn and discern the Reign of God through the Beatitudes so that we can be more confident about choosing and boarding the 'trains' that are part of God's big blessing.

Some of these causes connect and line up with each other, while others are moving on separate train tracks. These social movements cannot all be equal or okay in the eyes of God, and we are certainly aware that Christians do not necessarily agree on which are which! But people of faith cannot give in to inaction even when we are overwhelmed or confused, so we must look through the lens of the Beatitudes in order to live them, to board the *Gospel Train* at work through social movements, and to become obedient to the Reign of God as best we can perceive it! And, thankfully, the Spirit sighs with us and guides us in this struggle.

I'm guessing that many of us did not sleep well last week during the crisis of children being separated from their families at our borders – a part of immigration policy and the bigger legislative questions around it. Wednesday morning, Bob came to our check-in and reported how agitated he had been in the night thinking of this situation, and that he felt compelled to join the protestors at the State House at noon that day – especially so after the youth mission trip had toured the area in McAllen, Texas where some of these kids are being kept. This took priority. Our pastor heard the call "All Aboard!" and went. It made me proud.

Yesterday marked the mass rally in Washington, D.C. of the Poor People's Campaign for Moral Revival, a march challenging the connected evils of systemic racism, poverty, militarism, and ecological devastation. Our denomination, the United Church of Christ, was well represented; it had heard the call "All Aboard!" and I was proud to have been there in Spirit with the delegation!

Eugene Boring again. He beautifully connects Christianity to the Beatitudes, writing: "Christianity is a way of living based on the firm and sure hope that meekness is the way of God, that righteousness and peace will finally prevail, and that God's future will be a time of mercy and not cruelty. So, blessed are those who live this life *now*."⁴

"All Aboard!"

⁴Boring, 181.