

“Lessons from the Railroad” May 21, 2017

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church Pastor Bill Chadwick

Here we are on the sixth Sunday in the season of Eastertide. The fourth Sunday of Eastertide, two weeks ago, is traditionally “Good Shepherd Sunday,” and one of the scripture readings is always the 23rd Psalm. And the sixth Sunday of Eastertide, today, is traditionally Railroad Sunday.

Okay, I made that part up. Here’s how we got here today.

At a session meeting last year elder Betsy Marvin shared a devotion that her mom, Mattie Marvin, (slide #5—photo of Mattie) had used at, I think, a Presbyterian Women’s meeting. In that devotion, Mattie said that some Oak Grovers from time to time complain about the railroad tracks that run right next to the church building, especially when the train goes by during a meeting when people are trying to hear. However, Mattie said that she *likes* that the railroad tracks go right down the middle of our property. She said, “I think that it’s symbolic of Oak Grove. We are the church on *both* sides of the tracks. Everybody’s welcome.”

Isn’t that brilliant? I just had to share that. It got me to thinking about some other life lessons related to railroads in general, as well as experiences specific to this particular line, the Dan Patch Line, (slide # 6-horse) named after the famous (slide of Dan Patch) harness racing horse from Savage, and pretty soon I came up with a bunch of ideas for a sermon. (slide #7 blank)

That was the fun and relatively easy part. The more difficult part was coming up with a related scripture passage. There are precious few references to railroads in the Bible.

We do have Psalm 98:6: “Make a joyful noise before God, the Lord, with trumpets and **the sound of the horn.**”

Oak Grove has a long history with this line of railroad tracks. As does my family, the Chadwicks. I hope you will allow me to intersperse some personal history along with some railroad theological points.

My dad grew up in a house about 200 feet east of here, where the white office building is now. There was no high school in Bloomington at that time. (Yes, my dad was very old when I was born.) So to go to high school my dad each day took the train, the Dan Patch Line here, (slide # 8 electric line) into Minneapolis Central High School. Shortly after he graduated from high school he went to work for the railroad. He was the head of a track repair crew that traveled from site to site with the old-fashioned handcar, (slide #9—handcar) that you would pump to propel yourself along the track. Any of you remember these? I only know them from cartoons.

Dad's two older brothers, Ernie and Lloyd, were both engineers on this very line. (slide # 10-locomotive) As I said, my grandparents lived right over here. After the seven kids were out of the house my grandmother ran a boarding house there. Each afternoon when my uncles would drive their locomotives past the back of the house my grandmother would often be outside feeding the chickens, hanging wash on the line, or working in the garden, and my uncles would toot the horn and my grandma would wave... True story. Straight from Mayberry. (slide #11 blank)

Moving on from Chadwick stories for a bit.

One summer during high school a really good friend of mine was with a bunch of her friends trying to think up something fun to do. One of them came up with what he thought would be a brilliant idea for some fun. "Let's go up to the railroad trestle and go out on it. It will be safe because the train doesn't come until 4:00." So off they went. The Soo Line High Bridge (slide #12), also known as the Arcola Bridge, is a beautiful structure, which crosses the river north of Stillwater between Minnesota and Wisconsin at a height of 184 feet. These high school kids "knew" that the train didn't come until 4 o'clock and it was only 1:30, so they went out to the middle of the trestle and sat down and chatted and perhaps had a cigarette or two. After a few minutes one of them thought he heard something... "Did that sound like a train whistle to you?" "Nah, it couldn't be. I'm tellin' ya, the train doesn't come until 4." (very soft whistle. Count to 8. Little bit louder whistle.)

They leapt to their feet and started hurrying back to the riverbank. It was hard to run on a railroad trestle, despite being highly motivated. (loud whistle) The horn sounded again, now very close. They kept running as fast as possible without tripping and falling into the river. Now the train was in sight and barreling down on them. (very loud whistle) “We aren’t going to make it!...”

We’ll leave our heroes right there and come back to them later. (slide #13 blank)

About six years ago Carol Osweiler, our then-Director of Christian Education, who had worked here for ten years at that time, was leaving the upper church parking lot and driving toward the lower lot so she could go out the Penn Avenue entrance. As she was crossing the tracks (loud whistle) the train sounded its horn. It was right there! She hadn’t even looked. She was pre-occupied. She had crossed those tracks hundreds of times before and there had never been a train coming. She made it, but not by a lot.

We get used to situations and sometimes let down our guard. That was a dangerous lack of mindfulness on Carol’s part. Now, I don’t mean to pick on Carol because I am an expert on that—not mindfulness, the *lack* of mindfulness.

It’s something I’ve tried to work on a bit in recent years, with encouragement from my spouse. Mindfulness. One thing at a time. We don’t need to multi-task all day long. If I am doing the dishes, focus on the dishes. If I am walking the dogs, focus on the dogs and the beauty of the neighborhood, don’t try to catch up with my phone calls at the same time. Speaking of which, most important, if we are driving, let’s focus on driving. As my good friend Jim Gillespie told me in the early days of cell phones, when you get in your car, put your phone in the glove box.

As Carol almost found out the hard way, one little decision can make such a difference.

In Kansas City there is a switchyard. (slide #14—switch) If you pull the switch one way you wind up in New York. If you pull the switch the other way you come to San Francisco. (slide #15-- tracks diverging) One little decision.

So first, we are the church on both sides of the tracks. Second, mindfulness—one little decision. (slide #16—blank) Third. I've always loved waving to train engineers. It was a part of my growing up. In the old days you could also wave at the guys in the caboose. So when I first started here as pastor, with my office window 50 feet from the tracks, when the train would be coming I would often wave to the engineer. For months and months I did this, but he never waved back. Sometimes it seemed to me that he maybe even spotted my wave out of the corner of his eye and then turned away. But I figured it must be the reflection on my window. I presumed he couldn't actually see me so I gave him the benefit of the doubt. And I quit waving.

But about two years ago I noticed it was a different engineer, so I waved at him. And he smiled and waved back! I was so happy. For a second. But then I was ticked! I realized that the other engineer just *pretended* not to see me. He pretended I was invisible. That did not feel good. And I know that there are people in our society to whom that happens a lot—people with physical challenges, people of color, old people, homeless people.

Do you ever pretend someone is invisible? (slide #17--panhandler) I used to, when it came to people asking for money. I had heard the advice that it was much better to give your money to *organizations* helping the homeless than to individual people on the street. And so I did that, gave to organizations, both through Oak Grove and directly. And I still do. But a year or so ago I read about a couple of friends, Christian theologians, walking down the street together. Now this is a true story. I know it sounds like “a priest, a rabbi and an imam walked into a bar.” It's not a joke. These two men, who spend their working days wrestling with scripture and its ramifications, were walking together down the city sidewalk.

A ragged-looking person came up to them and asked for money. One of the men gave him a couple bucks. As they walked away, the other man said, “You know, it's really better to give to organizations that help the homeless than to individuals. Who knows what they're going to spend the money on?”

The first man was silent for a few steps and then he responded. “Yes, yes. I know. But I have come to the conclusion that my need to give overshadows the worthiness of the recipient...”

That has really stuck with me.

Of course, giving to the poor, having an “open hand,” is an ethic that runs throughout the length and breadth of scripture. We talked about it in last week’s Bible study lesson on Deuteronomy, chapter 15, verse 11: “I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.’” Proverbs 22:9: “Generous hands are blessed hands because they give bread to the poor.” And, of course, we find the principle of open hands throughout Jesus’ teachings.

Many of us prefer to give people useful items rather than cash, so the Social Justice Committee and others in the next month are organizing a group to gather, probably after worship, and put together care kits, bags of supplies for us to keep in our cars to give to folks rather than cash. These will include things like socks, granola bars, single-serve pop-top cans of pork & beans, tuna, travel size toiletries. Watch for the announcement. (slide #18 blank)

Fourth. Many of us love trains. How many of you had a train set as a kid or perhaps have one now? One of the things I love about locomotives is how incredibly powerful they are. (slide#19 of red locomotive) Amazing! And today they are incredibly fast! I had heard of Japanese bullet trains, but this week I discovered that the fastest trains in the world are now where? In China. The Shanghai Maglev, (slide #20 bullet train) has a regular operational speed of 267 mph, but it can hit 302 mph. There is a cool video on youtube of an American tourist riding that train and videotaping the countryside flying by. Then there’s a blink, as something flashed across the screen for literally a fraction of a second. It was a train heading the other direction, at a combined speed of 450 mph. I was going to show it to you, but you can’t really see anything.

Trains. So powerful. So fast! (slide #21 blank)

But imagine, what if a locomotive got all puffed up about how powerful and fast it is, and decided that instead of following the tracks laid out for it, that it would head

across the countryside? What would happen? It would quickly bog down and be disastrous. (slide #22 derailment)

Freedom for a locomotive is staying on the tracks.

What is freedom for human beings? (slide #23 blank)

Staying on track. Some people think that God's laws are restrictive and no fun. But in fact, they are intended for us to have the maximum amount of enjoyment and satisfaction in life. The Ten Commandments are all about freedom. The Israelites have just come out of slavery in Egypt and God wants them to stay free. "Thou shalt not steal;" "Thou shalt not covet." If you are green with envy over your neighbor's stuff, you are enslaved to that stuff. "Thou shalt not lie." If you lie, you have to remember the details of that lie all the time, so you don't mess up. You have become a slave to that lie. "Remember the Sabbath day." If you work every day of the week, you have become a slave again.

The scriptures are all about freedom: Let my people go. Freedom for a locomotive is staying on the tracks, where it can be all that its makers intended it to be, a thing of power and beauty... Same for us. We are intended to be creatures of power and beauty, and we are...as long as we stay on track.

Well, shall we go back to those terrified high school kids on the trestle, (slide #24 high bridge) with the train bearing down on them? They realized they couldn't make it across. I'd like to say that they leapt to safety into the river 184 feet below. No. What they did is lean against the railing as tightly as they could while the train zoomed past them inches from their backsides. They survived. Thankfully. (That "really good friend of mine" is the mother of my children, my wife, Kris.)

After the train passed, they walked, breathless and wobbly-kneed, back to their cars. Before they could drive away a police car pulled up. And boy, did they get into trouble. Literally. The boys got into trouble. And the girls didn't. What can I say? It was 1978. (slide #25 blank for rest of sermon)

Before a final story, let me recap: (1) : Oak Grove is the church on both sides of the tracks. Everyone is welcome. (2) Mindfulness, coupled with “one little decision” can have big consequences. (3) Let us not treat people as if they were invisible, but recognize and acknowledge each person’s humanity. (4) Freedom for a locomotive is staying on the tracks. Freedom for human beings is staying on God’s track. (5) Stay off railroad trestles.

Final railroad story. There was a big old spider that lived on the outside of a railroad tunnel. Early each morning she would spin her web across the entrance of the tunnel, a beautiful, delicate web, quivering in the breeze. And various bugs would attempt to fly into the tunnel, not seeing the tiny filaments of the web, and they would be caught and they would be lunch.

But late each afternoon the spider would hear from far off the whistle of a train coming through the tunnel, followed shortly by the rumbling of a locomotive, which caused her web to tremble and then with a deafening WHOO-OOOOOO the train came through and destroyed her web, before she had an opportunity to eat all the delightful morsels that had fallen into her trap. Ooh, that fried her potatoes! Day after day that locomotive blasted through her gossamer web.

After many days in a row of this, the spider came up with a plan. “Tomorrow morning I will not make my web with tiny strings that are almost invisible. No, tomorrow my goal will not be to catch bugs, but to catch that train, once and for all.” So she got up extra early the next morning and started to weave her web across the entrance to that tunnel. Back and forth she went. Up and down, then side to side, up and down, side to side, on a diagonal, occasionally making knots...oh, it was magnificent. Not as beautiful as usual, but oh, so strong! After a few hours of steady work the spider couldn’t even see into the tunnel; the web was an inch thick. “Surely this will be strong enough to catch that noisy, horrible train!” thought the spider. “But just to make sure, I will add another layer.” And she did. Up and down. Side to side. Down and up. Diagonal to diagonal. Another whole inch thick. “Hah!” said the spider to herself. “This is a world record web. After today I will not need to worry about that blasted train.” She moved to the edge of the tunnel to await the train.

Soon she could just make out the whistle of the train far into the tunnel. Then another sound of the horn a little louder; then she could feel the rumble of the weight of that locomotive. But today her web did not shudder and shake, it hardly moved a smidge because it was so strong. “Hah! Look at that!” said the spider. “There’s no way that train can break *this* web.”

Louder and louder came the sound of the thundering locomotive. With a final (loud whistle whoo-ooo) that train roared on through, and of course, that web ripped to shreds.

At the beginning of the sermon I reminded us that this is the sixth Sunday of Eastertide. On Good Friday, the forces of Evil and Death thought they had taken care of Jesus once and for all. They thought he would never leave that cave...

But (LOUD whistle) “whoo-ooooo!”

To the God of Resurrection be the honor and the glory and the praise, now and forever. Amen!