

Trinity Church  
July 5, 2009

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost  
RCL, Year B, Proper 9

A Sermon Preached by The Rev. James C. Ransom

### Independence Day

This was the week of the move. Matthew and Curtis arrived from Hanover Transfer and packed up what Debbie and I thought we should leave for the professionals, and then they started putting it all in the truck. It wasn't a huge truck, but just the same, I thought, "Our stuff won't fill even half of this van; they should have brought a smaller one." Several hours later, the whole truck was full. "How in the world did we get so much stuff!"

Seeing the truck try to pull out of Blackburn Court, inching past the parked cars on both sides of our narrow street, I thought of my grandmother, Effie Lynn, packing up the few things that could go in a farm wagon, and heading south from Minnesota to Held, Iowa, to marry my grandfather, JW, who came west from Illinois as a telegrapher on the newly built railroad with what he could put in a carpet bag, to marry Effie and then cross the Missouri to set up shop in a Nebraska town founded less than ten years before on the obscure north fork of the Elkhorn River. They arrived in the same wagon that Effie had loaded up in Minnesota. And it must have been the same for old Jacob Ransom who came from England to Connecticut as a defeated Puritan Roundhead in the 1650s, and whose children moved to the newly established Republic of Vermont in the early 1700s, and whose son, named Amasa, moved to farmland in Ohio, and then to Illinois, and then in the next generation to Minnesota, and then to Iowa, and Nebraska. I think I was the first Ransom ever to move east. They all had just one wagon and a couple of horses. Deb and I would have needed a whole wagon train to move our stuff. What were we thinking?

From a Biblical perspective, the Ransoms did get one thing right. "Jesus called the twelve and began to send them out two by two." We are not meant to stay home, or remain all cozy in the church we love. We are people meant to be sent out to proclaim the Gospel and live the Good News in new places and among new people. And former generations of Ransoms understood that they weren't to take much with them. "Take nothing for your journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in your belts; wear sandals and don't take two tunics." But when you arrive, Jesus says, form a community of hospitality where you are welcomed. Live in peace, preach the Gospel, and help people find healing and grace that comes from God. Quality of life doesn't have much to do with material security, but all to do with the quality of relationships and community life. Do people care for one another? Sustain each other in joy and sorrow? Be instruments of grace and healing for one another? Lead one another into a deeper relationship with Christ?

The American story has been a history of restlessness, of going ever Westward to establish new communities, plow new land, build new towns, establish new relationships of mutual support, trust, healing and grace, new venues in which to receive and live the Gospel. Baltimore was one of several cities that supplied that history. A river boat called the Bartram sank in the Missouri near Omaha in the 1850s, going north to supply outposts of the fur trade. Some years ago the river changed course, the boat was recovered in the 1960s, and many of its goods. Over half of the canned goods, tin wear, clothes and tools were made in Baltimore, including a large supply of ketchup!

When we moved to Baltimore twenty years ago, and we were getting to know the city, I thought of the Bartram's cargo, and sure enough, there they were in East Baltimore, the remains of Tin Deco, a clothing district, and canning factories that made ketchup.

From the disciples onward, this restless spirit that characterizes American life has characterized Christian life. Jesus has planted a yearning within us to move on from Nazareth, where the work was stale, and to go into the villages of Galilee and proclaim that all should repent, cast out demons and anoint with oil many who are sick and heal them. Terry Fulham, a noted Episcopal evangelist, said that you could tell when the church was stuck in Nazareth. It's when we focus all our energy on the church, "trying to be the least offensive to the least committed," he would say. It's when we become "the bland leading the bland."

Jesus is amazed at our unbelief. But when we put those few essentials of the Gospel in our hearts and go out to meet new people in new situations, then miracles happen.

Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, giving a reflection for a group of Christian politicians, said it this way: "Faith gives us the enormous gift of transformation. With faith we *can* forgive, we *can* heal, and we *can be* healed and forgiven. This faith gives us the gift of hope that frees us to tackle impossible challenges — poverty, hunger, disease, violence. Powered by faith — given strength by Jesus — we can go outside the comfortable and act." "It is time," she said, "that we start allowing faith to breathe freely and speak honestly, never silencing the better angels of our nature, seeing the holy in our fellow human beings, and our duty to one another in Christ." That is not the bland leading the bland. That is what Effie Lynn did when she put a few things in the farm wagon and headed to Iowa and a new life yet to be revealed. Going outside the comfortable is perhaps the American Experience.

So, where does that leave Deb and me, and that truckload of stuff that we are moving just because we can? Not in a good place, really. Paul has something to say on this point.

Paul says that he was privileged, fourteen years ago, to be drawn into God's presence. "Whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows — I was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told." Paul was overwhelmed by this immense glory against which no earthly thing can ever be compared. After seeing God in glory, he said, "Of God's glory I will boast, but of myself I will not boast, I will talk only of my weakness, for whenever I am weak, then am I strong."

The plain truth is that the Gospel is conveyed, blessings given, transfiguration of life bestowed, not in abundance, but always in weakness — a weakness and humility that allows God's grace and glory to flow through us to others, and through others to us.

Even in these truly difficult times, we are a people of amazing abundance. The temptation that comes with abundance is that we do things because we can, not because it is good for us or anyone else. We see freedom, not as a liberation from greed to serve, but as the privilege of doing things just because we can. We see the pursuit of happiness as some kind of personal psychic fulfillment, and not as the pursuit of the common good, which brings contentment to all. Worst of all, we embrace the pride of thinking that what gives us power and a secure identity is better being better than everyone else — the illusive pursuit of excellence — the right to have more than others have.

For Paul, God's unbelievable glory that surpasses understanding ends that temptation forever. Paul was freed to understand himself as the humble, weak, bumbling servant of God, freed by Christ Jesus to be an instrument of God's grace. No purse, no bag, nothing of which to boast except Christ crucified, and himself as your servant for Jesus' sake.

That is how we are called to live individually, as a church and as a nation. Humble servants of the common good, claiming nothing for ourselves, and giving all the glory to God. And then we discover ourselves to be embraced by the liberty to the children of God, and the transforming pursuit of true happiness. Amen.