

Palisades Presbyterian Church  
Palisades, New York  
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Another Subway Sermon  
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This is the time of the year when I do a lot of commuting by subways. For almost twenty years now, as many of you have heard before, I spend Thanksgiving volunteering on the Macy\*s Thanksgiving Day Parade. It's a very cool thing to do, and I have done many jobs in the event – from flying the Snuggles Balloon, to Uptown Staging, mid-Parade marshalling, and for the last ten or more years as stage manager at 35<sup>th</sup> Street, cueing the Parade into Herald Square for the telecast.

Half that time ago, it dawned on me why I do such a thing. I have walked the line-of-march more than once, seeing up-close and live those pictures of kids bundled-up under the barricades, wool-capped and mittened, awed and delighted. Kids, craning the necks straight back and up, as far as they would go, mouths wide open as the likes of Big Bird and Kermit pass by. Cheering: as impressive marching high school bands, clowns, and comic book characters brought to life atop floats - make their way toward Herald Square and 34<sup>th</sup> Street in this *circus gone sideways*. And of course, it all leading up to the anxious moment when the star himself, reindeer and all arrives to the sheer joy of millions – young and a bit younger than that!

It is about *sheer* joy in the midst of a city, nation, world filled with such brokenness and need.

Amidst it all, the homeless poor, others marginalized and disenfranchised, the wars, and the more we all know...

the Parade gives me hope.

It has become for me a symbol of the “human spirit” and what it can accomplish when folks – diverse as we are come together and focus on one thing! The over 4,000 people who volunteer along with the hundreds of staff – all of enormous heart and talent – produce something much greater than the total of their individual efforts. Something else is born in the process that elevates the outcome of this 2½ miles of exuberance to a national event “greater than the sum its parts...” – greater in ways than all the tens of millions who will view it combined.

In short, it comes to life, borne of the hopes, excitement, and determined wishes, imaginings, and hard work of all who volunteer or watch it.

Along with the chance to be with the great friends I have made over the years in this reunion/pilgrimage that draws us in each November, as I said, the Parade has become a symbol to me of just what the human spirit can accomplish when we work together. It is in my heart as evidence of the results of never giving up. And it helps me, in its own way, to “keep on keeping on.”

And that hope, optimism, fortitude – or whatever we call it that keeps us from malaise or apathy – is what we need more of, for such things as despair, disinterest, or derision – can only take away our energy, working the opposite of what it is that lifts the spirit within us.

As with most endeavors - big or small – it is a *fait à compli* that while we can accomplish much individually, there are just some things for which we need others (read: community), dedicated in some way to distributing the daunting tasks we face over many others; others who are committed to making things different, making them right, bringing out the sacred and the holy in all we are and do.

Community. While it has always attracted me at some level – I have also had a difficult time with the pace of community life, especially when it involves hierarchy and authority stalled around slow-moving justice. Such inaction produces a knee-jerk reaction inside of me, firing synapses at lightning speed, emblazoning the marquee in my head and heart with the notion and drive that I can somehow will or *determine* myself to single-handedly done, whatever has been stalled or derailed because of politics, strategy, inconvenience, expense, not the right time...the list goes on.

I've mentioned before that one of my favorite quotes has always been the following, attributed to Jack London:

“I would rather be ashes than dust! I would rather that my spark should burn out in a brilliant blaze than it should be stifled by dry-rot. I would rather be a superb meteor, every atom of me in magnificent glow, than a sleepy and permanent planet. The function of humans is to live, not to exist. I shall not waste my days trying to prolong them. I shall use my time.”

It's true, there is a part of me that wants to mark this journey by a long, cascading aurora borealis of sparks in brilliant blaze – a marker to life and being alive, transcending this [body] to the quantum levels of the universal energy upon which we all dance...and then tap into it...with others to change the world.

Deep inside, I know this *me* in ways that I can't describe to you. It's too exciting for words. Maybe you know it, too. It's good, positive, connected to God – it is like a Bluetooth connected to God as the source of all power. It's one of the reasons why the verse from Psalm 46:10 “Be still and know that I am God” is so darn explosive. It's hard to be still in the midst of all that – hard to move, too!

Knowing myself a bit, I also know my ego can take this ubiquitous presence of God and twist it into an arrogance, ideologically based pride, tumbling rapidly toward hubris or worse: cynicism and nihilism (the loss of hope), and in the process dismissing or discarding others, echoes of John-Paul Sartre's famous line from his play (*Huis-clos*) No Exit: “L'enfer, c'est les autres,” usually translated as “Hell is other people.”

It's easy, in some ways, to descend – and I do think it is a descent – to such a place when we look around at the enormous needs we face in this world and just give up, despair – knowing how impotent we sometimes are to effect any visible, quantifiable, “make me feel better that I did something” – difference.

Subways seem to be a place of crystallization for me, where often below ground, I get well-deserved comeuppance – forced to look around in ways I too often simply miss.

Yesterday morning, as I got on the shuttle from Grand Central to Times Square, on my way to 34<sup>th</sup> Street and Macy's, a man – in the grime-stained clothing of many homeless poor or ill: turned up jacket collar on a day that needed something warmer, rope through the loop of his pants, untied shoes that seemed not to match – tentatively entered the car, disorientated, alone, conversing with no one I could see.

He sat in the two-seat area next to the door, the seats with the sign that says “Please give these seats up for our passengers who need special seating.” As he sat down, he tried to curl up in a space too small; I was unsure of whether he was trying to get some sleep – or simply pull himself further away from the others around him.

I smiled in his direction and got no response or acknowledgement. I thought about his situation and the many others like him. I thought about my life, comfortable, overbooked; able to satisfy my whims, most of the time; engaged in good work – most of the time; and a *work-in-progress* all of the time. I thought about the meal I had that morning, the warm bed, all those things....

I made a decision then and there to reach in my pocket and put aside a bill that I would give him when we left the subway.

As we rumbled into Times Square, I waited until he had gotten up and followed him out. Moving alongside him, money in hand, I said, “Hey Buddy, would a few dollars help.”

No response. No acknowledgment. No recognition I was even there. No grateful acceptance of my offer so that I could comfortably go on my way, feeling as though I had done something to help.

Instead, he headed for the nearest trash bin and scavenged for bottles to redeem; in deafening silence clearly saying to me – “What makes you think I need your help; I am doing fine, thank you. You think your money is going to change this?”

Aaargh. I was put in my place without a word, robbed of a chance to fix something, and reduced to what I am often reduced to – a prayer. Brought back to right-size, humbled back into my state of powerlessness, reminded that in all things it was about reliance on God – not my money, eloquence, or self-directed motives. God, however it is God is understood.

On that platform yesterday, it was me who was given something, reminded again of what I had been taught before: it is not about me, but about the community of which I am a part – for it is when we are gathered in community with God that nothing – nothing is impossible.

The person on that platform hefted up what I truly believe in flesh and blood form, that we have much work to do in removing the “membership rules” to the point where all know they are welcome and needed to do the work set before us. It starts with prayer and then action: even when the action causes some discomfort for others – for ourselves. Certain ills are too egregious to be *comfortably addressed*. And that, for me, is who and what we are and why we are here.

See, I don’t know of many other reasons for being church, *ecclesia* – the people. As the *ecclesia*, we gather here, we worship God, and then we reach out – out – to help one another and others. For most of us here, the method we follow is based on the teaching and traditions of Jesus.

We are part of spreading the Gospel, the Good News; along with other faith traditions demonstrating time and again that not only can we meet the extraordinary demands of our own lives and family – but also have time for others.

We must resist the clever ideology that produces the compartmentalization of institutional bias, grouping and organizing many into conveniently recognizable labels that make it possible to objectify others who make us uncomfortable or produce too many demands for equality and justice. Just as the Parade is unconditionally available to all who wish to watch, produced by many for all – so

too do we need to make what we have available for all and then *go out and invite them in, without exception,*

Would we ever make exceptions to welcoming God into our midst. It seems we do. If we truly are an extension of God, any time we push away the other – we push away God. That has to be true, doesn't it? We all need to find ways to step out of our boxes (our closets for that matter, too!) and welcome the new thing God is doing by welcoming others – unconditionally.

In this morning's readings, Isaiah exhorted those in his time in the same way, if in different words, as he spoke for God:

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress.

It takes time, but that's no reason for distress. I understand this completely, as a *work-in-progress*, myself. I always feel I need to do more. That's probably why I find myself in the places and work I do. I've noticed that I am inclined toward places that assure me in some way that I am part of the good, the hope, the promise – even when I fail in my efforts or have no idea of how they might be helpful to others – the community picks up the slack. That's one of the glowing endorsements of community.

By being a part of something greater than just me, I am contributing to something larger than me that multiplies my efforts, minimizes my shortcomings, and overall produces a meteor in somewhat magnificent glow, something like a Parade, but really more like a long, beautifully, and bountifully set table – with a seat for all.

That's why church.

Secular institutions have some of the same priorities but not the amplification of witness and discipleship that brings hope and light to the deepest of subterranean places and those who live there. Church, done right, knows the source of its greatest power and relies on that power – that is God – in ways that most secular organizations are unable to integrate or articulate.

Jesus says it in Luke, this morning, in this way:

[These things] will give you an opportunity to testify. So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.

That's why we cannot exclude, limit, or shun even one – in my mind – not just because we are taught to welcome the stranger (for they just might be an angel) – but because there is no hope for this planet unless we somehow keep the balance tipped in favor of the other and less in favor of self. It is the foundation of this and many other traditions of faith.

“C'mon,” some might say, “Why? Why bother?”

It has to do with why we are here. It has to do with that deep and presiding presence of God in all of us, as we know God, God that has led us here and will lead us forward, as individuals – and community. That's what I think.

[Pause]

So, I went on with my day, yesterday, praying a lot more – not just for the gentleman on the train – but for the world, in general. I didn't want to leave anyone out!

I was so grateful to be able to lean into prayer and know that it works, somehow, and grateful that praying seems to somehow bring me closer to God, into a calming and assuring place that reminds me I am not in charge, nor am I alone – nor was the gentlemen searching for redeemable bottles.

I felt more hope as the day went on, knowing that I am really a minister among ministers, praying always together, reaching out – encouraged by the great promise God has given us and the great Spirit that is multiplied when we gather in God's presence, like a place like a city in preparation for its own Thanksgiving tradition, where the most amazing things can happen when we come together, even in the midst of the most difficult of times.

For me, for you, perhaps you agree – there is no better cause for Thanksgiving.

Amen.