

Plunder the Egyptians

Luke 7:1-10

Have you ever heard the phrase, being born on “the wrong side of the tracks”? The origin is believed to refer to that time when trains were an important means of transportation. And with trains came heavy black smoke and soot which the wind would blow to one side of the tracks where only the poorest of people would live. No one wanted to be on “the wrong side of the tracks.”

How many here this morning grew up in a town where there was a “wrong side of the track” or maybe even a “wrong side of town”? Did it have a name? [I lived in West Orange NJ, and there were two High Schools. Mountain, on the side of town that was high in elevation, and West Orange High, which was at the “bottom of the hill”].

Truth is, every one here has come from the “wrong side of the tracks”. Whether you grew up on a swanky estate, a ritzy mansion, a standard suburban “splanchn” (split level ranch), a shanty in the woods or an apartment in the city, you were on the “wrong side of the tracks” at some time in your life.

Whenever we wander out of our comfort zone; whenever we venture away from what feels familiar and safe to us, we are on the “wrong side of tracks.” Off our home turf, we feel vulnerable and threatened, unsure of where we stand, and knowing we “stand out.”

Jesus was born into a very specific “side of the tracks.” As a first-century, Torah-observing, Jewish male in Israel, he lived on the good side of the tracks. All around him, though, were other “sides of the track,” and he & his kind had to be careful about “their kind”.

You see, in order to keep the Jewish faith alive and Hebrew identity strong in such an environment, strict laws were established that separated the people of Israel from all the other tribes and travelers who lived among them. Keeping kosher meant that an observant Jew could never eat a meal with a Gentile.

Simply to enter the home of someone who did not observe all the laws of ritual purity and cleanliness provided for in the holiness code, meant instantaneous defilement. One reason tax collectors were so easily outcast and ostracized was because they had to be in constant physical contact with Gentile Roman rulers. By virtue of their profession, they lived in a constant state of ritual defilement.

For first century observant Jews it was clear that there were “outsiders” and “insiders” , and anyone who stood outside the people of Israel was on the “wrong side of the tracks”.

And yet, throughout the Old Testament there are stories that show how “outsiders” could engage with and enter into a compassionate, respected relationship with those “inside” the covenant community. Here are some names: Rahab, Ruth, Uriah, Naaman, Cyrus. Over and over in Scripture, these people from the “wrong side of the tracks” seems to be God's favorite way to get God's people back “on track.”

And **Jesus himself was always wandering off to the wrong side of the tracks.**

- He touched and healed lepers and madmen.
- He offered living water to a Samaritan woman with sketchy moral pedigree.
- He engaged and enabled a Syrophenician mother so that she might obtain healing for her daughter.

And in today's text, Jesus declared that a Roman centurion possessed a faith greater than any he had found within “all Israel.” Them's fightin' words! The ultimate outsider, a Gentile Roman soldier, was proclaimed to be more faithful than those on the “in” side of the tracks.

The centurion trusted Jesus enough to “just say the word,” and there would be healing. The centurion had a “just-say-the-word” faith.

The truth is: in spite of his rich heritage and Torah-based identity, Jesus was “trackless.” Birds have their nests. Foxes have their holes. But the Son of Man intentionally and continually meandered across all the lines that separated “His people” from “those people”.

Jesus had no “home ground.” Or more precisely, Jesus made all ground home ground, and all home ground holy

. I remember hearing Dr. Christy Wilson, my World Missions professor in Seminary, say that that Christians should “plunder the Egyptians.” By that he didn’t mean some kind of destructive activity, not some “jihad”, but rather a positive way of connecting our faith to the missional context in which we find ourselves.

“Plundering the Egyptians” meant that we are called to go out into the world — not stay on our “side of the tracks” safe and sound. Plundering the Egyptians means that we wander into those places and encounter those people outside our neighborhood, our nation, and our comfort zones.

Plundering the Egyptians means that we learn about the world around us, and then find the best way to offer Christ to the world. To “plunder the Egyptians” is not to be in tune with the culture, but in touch with the culture and in tune with the Spirit. It’s what Jesus prayed for his followers – that we would be IN the world, but OF Spirit.

In the first century, for the first Christians, this meant crossing over the tracks that divided Jews from Gentiles. In the twenty-first century for today’s Christians this means engaging a world that no longer has any ultimate faith in anything.

Today we are defined by our technologies, our brands and our social network connections. People who have faith in God need to plunder the technologies, the brands, and the variety of social media to help people experience God.

If our children cannot imagine a life without an online connection, then Jesus’ disciples need to be online. Plunder the Egyptians.

If the most meaningful community people commit to is visited by hitting a “send” button, then Jesus’ disciples need to access by that button. Plunder the Egyptians.

If no one is doing “coffee hour” after church, but everyone is hanging out at the coffee shop that has free Wi-fi, then Jesus’ disciples need to be at that coffee shop or putting in a neighborhood café with free WiFi. Plunder the Egyptians.

Use the web, surf, Skype, tweet, make the “cloud” the new “cloud of witnesses.” Plunder the Egyptians and have a blog party. Ministers sponsor pot lucks. Missionaries put on blog parties.

The world, no matter how unconnected or unconcerned with Christ it seems, is never the “wrong side of the tracks” for Jesus’ disciples. Be they Drug dealers or debutantes or Dope heads, CEO’s, CFO’s, or C3PO’s. The marginal, the maximal, or the minimal. Those who hold fast to everything, and those who’s fists hold on to nothing. There is no “wrong side of the tracks” for Jesus’ disciples.

Jesus willingly walked towards a situation that he knew would jeopardize his standing as a Jew and mark him as person of questionable religious character for the rest of his life. But the faith-inspired Roman centurion’s assertion of Jesus’ power and authority “plundered” that problem.

In fact, instead of bringing Jesus down, this unclean Roman centurion elevated Christ to a new level. The “just-say-the-word” testimony of one from the “wrong side of the tracks” put Jesus on a road that would transform the world.

The Roman centurion is but one of a long line of “just-say-the-word” characters who stepped forth in faith to change the world.

- Are you Nehemiah who will retool from cup-bearer to brick-layer and rebuild the walls of Zion?
- Are you Ezekiel who will ride chariots wherever truth take them, to find its source in the very heart of God? (47:1-12)
- Are you Isaiah who will let angels carry them to throne rooms of glory where, with lips kissed by burning coals, say "Here am I, send me!"?
- Are you Enoch and Elijah who will walk with God until people see them no more?
- Are you Mary who will walk beyond the boundaries of comprehension to unknown territories of total trust and say,

I think you are. Friends – it’s time to Plunder the Egyptians.