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“Thomas the Train Moments”

A sermon by Homer Ashby

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Job 23:1–9, 16–27; Psalm 22:1–15; Mark 10:17–31

I want to give praise to all of you for being at worship today. No power, no heat, no organ. And on top of that, you have a fourth-string preacher. There will surely be a star in your crown in heaven.

And if all that we have had to face this morning is not enough, we have to contend with the lectionary texts. Listen again to excerpts from these texts.

From Job: “God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me; for I am hemmed in by darkness, and thick darkness covers my face.” From Psalms: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Why art thou so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but thou dost not answer; and by night, but find no rest... I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax, it is melted within my breast; my strength has dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue cleaves to my jaws; thou dost lay me in the dust of death.”

There is good news buried in these texts, but it will take us some unearthing to find it. So I invite you to journey with me so that we do not wind up like the man with great possessions who hopelessly gave up on his desire for eternal life.

Jesus makes a lot of the financial condition of the man who came to consult him. He uses this man’s wealth as a foundation to talk about the difficulty those of means will have in entering the kingdom of God. It will be more difficult for

them to enter heaven than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. But is this text only talking about the struggle of rich people to find salvation? I ask this question for two reasons. First, Peter asks, well, how can any of us be saved? But neither Peter nor any of the other disciples was rich. So, perhaps the dilemma is not associated just with having many possessions. Second, this same story in Luke adds a new element. Instead of reciting the commandments, Jesus asks the man what does the scripture say. He answers correctly: to love God with all of one's heart, mind and soul and to love one's neighbor as oneself. Jesus tells him he has answered well: "Do this and you will live." But the man cannot let it go at that; he asks Jesus who is my neighbor, and Jesus answers with the story of the Good Samaritan. The Good Samaritan story challenges the man, then, and us, today, to do that which we know to be right, but may be reluctant to do because of some inner barrier. So, living a righteous life does not have to do exclusively with giving up all of our possessions, but has to do with giving up all of the things that get in the way of our following Christ faithfully.

It's about being pushed beyond our limits to do what is right and pleasing in God's sight. It might take the form of apologizing even when we know we weren't fully to blame for the argument we just had with someone. Or forgiving someone who has hurt or abused us. Or recognizing our own limitations so that we do not make promises we can't keep. Or being so self-protective that we refuse to make ourselves vulnerable to the needs of others. I call these "Thomas the Train" moments.

My two grandsons love Thomas the Train and his friends, Percy, Toby, Emily, Edward, just to name a few. They are fictional locomotives who live on the island of Sodor and provide transportation and haul freight. Invariably in any given episode, one of the locomotives gets him or herself in trouble. It may have been trying to impress the others, or not willing to take advice, or taking too much of a risk. At any rate, there comes that moment when the locomotive recognizes that he or she has messed up and must rectify the situation. Then comes the words of the narrator: "Thomas (insert Percy, Toby, Edward) knew what he had to do." At that moment of recognition, the locomotive sees how they have messed up and realizes that something must be done to set things right. In the Thomas the Train Episodes, the newly conscious locomotive immediately sets out to do what is called for. In the Thomas stories, action follows acknowledgement; with us, not so much. We see what needs to be done,

but just can't bring ourselves to do it. We, like Peter, admit that the things that we should do we do not. There is a kind of darkening despair that haunts us. We have the knowledge of what needs to be done. The narrator inside of us tells what we know we have to do, but we resist. And it may not be a defiant resistance; we may feel a sense of defeated resignation that says, "I just can't do it."

And the stakes do not have to be as high as eternal life. Jesus claims that the benefits are available now. It may be an apology that spares you and the other person a prolonged period of alienation and bitterness. It may be an act of forgiveness that frees you from the burden of anger and hurt. It may be permission to say no at any given moment so that life is not as stressed or overwhelming. It may be an act of reaching out to another in spite of your fear of being consumed so as to eliminate guilt and self-recrimination. Some way in which we move beyond that which robs us of what we can receive a hundredfold in this time.

These Thomas the Train moments do not apply to just personal and individual limits. There are some situations in which we as a society are faced with what appears to be the impossible: eliminating poverty, hunger and homelessness; establishing a sustainable and lasting peace; reconciling divergent visions of where our country ought to be headed. Many of us in this congregation are engaged in these monumental tasks of building the realm of God and find ourselves, at times, caught up in despair and frustration, wondering if we have what it takes to keep going.

Blocked by our own inability to claim Jesus' promise of abundant life, God stands ready to help us accomplish what feels impossible in our lives. This is the good news that is available to us today. But it requires two things of us. First, we must acknowledge that what we want to accomplish is impossible to accomplish alone. We have been created with limits. To deny this is to deny our own humanity. Second, in light of our creatureliness, dependence upon God is where our potential deliverance lies. Not just for ourselves individually, but for the whole world. Each of us has that thing that if we could just face ourselves to do it, life would be immeasurably better. The risk is great—that is part of the reason we resist, but the reward is not just in the life to come, but in life right now: transforming and life-saving.

Before I end, let me give two warnings. The first has to do with acknowledging our limits. The acknowledgement of limits should not be an excuse to quit. The unnamed man we read about today is not the only example in Scripture of giving in to what seems too difficult. Moses who stuttered, Jeremiah who thought he was too young. The acknowledgement should lead to a request for help which God will provide. The second warning has to do with too much dependence upon God's help. Taking the leap of faith to respond faithfully to God's call upon our lives is always a somewhat painful process. We just can't put it in God's hands and be done with it. Thomas the Train moments invariably involve facing something about ourselves we would rather not see, taking on something we would rather avoid, and embracing uncertainty about how it might work out. But, there too, the good news is that God promises an outcome whose reward exceeds by a hundredfold whatever we have had to give up, be it pride, a grudge or a treasured image of ourselves. With this good news, we know what we have to do. May God grant us the wisdom, courage and strength to do so.