

IS THIS ANY WAY TO RUN A RAILROAD?
Matthew 10:5-23
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Imagine you are a slave, torn from your native Africa and hauled on a slave ship for 3,000 miles where you were stacked like cord wood and where 2/3's of your compatriots either die from disease or starvation or commit suicide by jumping into the Atlantic Ocean. Assuming you survived the trip, imagine you were bought or sold on a whim, permanently separated from your loved ones because you are treated as mere property, whipped whenever your overseer feels like it and worked, literally to death, under a blazing hot southern sun, picking cotton. Imagine that this is your lot for the rest of your life. What would you do? You might try to escape to freedom.

But how? A song tells you: *Follow the drinking gourd. For the old man is waiting to carry you to freedom.* The old man is Peg Leg Joe, a carpenter with a wooden left 'peg leg', who left tracks from his peg leg along the Tombigbee River in Alabama and Mississippi. The Drinking Gourd is the Big Dipper with its 2 pointer stars pointing to the North Star. By following the direction of the pointers, you will know which direction to run.

The song also tells you to start your journey in winter: *When the sun comes back and the first quail calls.* It adds: *The riverbank makes a very good road. The dead trees will show you the way, there's another river on the other side, Follow the drinking gourd.* This tells you to follow to the end

of the Tombigbee River in Mississippi and then to continue north over the hills until you meet the Tennessee River.

The song ends: *Where the great big river meets the little river, follow the drinking gourd. The old man is waiting to carry you to freedom, if you follow the drinking gourd.* The “great big river” is the Ohio, or “The Jordan,” as many spirituals call it. If you are fortunate enough not to be caught along the way you will find the river is frozen, because it will take you a year to reach it. Then you can walk to the other side, to freedom.

As Joe Culpepper and I followed “The Drinking Gourd” while cycling the Underground Railroad, we imagined slaves hiding in the forests by day and traveling amid the brambles and poison ivy by night. We imagined slaves “wading in the waters” of streams like the Tombigbee and Tennessee to throw dogs off their scent, something we wish we could’ve done in the South, where there are apparently no leash laws. A colleague asked what major revelation I had on the trip. My answer? Slavery was far worse than I ever imagined. Why else did slaves risk vicious dogs, poisonous snakes, starvation, illness and death to find their way to freedom?

And why was the railroad “Underground?” Until the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 and the end of the Civil War in 1865, slaves had nowhere to hide but Canada, which abolished slavery in 1820. This explains the genius of why the Underground Railroad used codes to help

slaves find their way north. Quilts were sewn with squares showing arrows pointing the way to freedom. Spirituals like “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” and its verse “angels coming after me” let slaves know friends would be waiting to help. This is why I slowly started to realize during my ride how important relationships of trust were on the Underground Railroad.

In 1850 President Millard Fillmore signed “The Fugitive Slave Act” into law. This law permitted slave catchers to enter Northern states and reclaim escaped slaves. The law also demanded neighbors turn in neighbors who were harboring escaped slaves: a page out of George Orwell’s novel *1984*. So, a ferry captain, hauling a slave across the Ohio River might inform slave catchers of a slave he’d helped cross the river. Any person who failed to do so and was found out could incur an exorbitant fine and be sentenced to years in prison. It wasn’t just slaves who took a risk to escape slavery; so did workers on the Underground Railroad who aided and abetted their escape. One conductor, John Parker, a freed black, who helped other blacks cross the river at Ripley, Ohio, had a bounty on his head for an ungodly sum of \$40,000, Dead or Alive! Ironically these mostly anonymous heroes stood ready to risk punishment and death in the cause to free slaves.

American philosopher George Santayana once remarked, “Those who forget their history are bound to repeat it.” While slavery must never be repeated, the lessons of the Underground Railroad are quite another story.

It's a story of heroes from every race and walk of life, like John Parker and Harriet Tubman, "A Woman Called Moses," who risked their lives and their freedom to see the abolition of the evil of slavery. It's why if we ask, "Is this any way to run a railroad?" of the Underground, our answer has to be a hearty, "YES!" The Underground Railroad provides a template of what the church needs to become if it is to be transformed and relevant for meeting the challenges of our rapidly changing society.

Like the safe-house Presbyterian Minister John Rankin built atop a hill overlooking Ripley, Ohio, and the Ohio River. Whenever he learned it was safe to cross the Ohio, he'd light a lamp and set it in his window, where it could be seen across the river in Kentucky. The Rankins provided refuge for more than a thousand slaves as they made their way north to freedom.

The question we need to ask is whether this church is setting out a light of hospitality and justice for the poor and dispossessed.

Unfortunately, many people believe that to be authentic, Christians should be naïve about the ways of the world; though, Jesus advises his disciples "*to be wise as serpents.*" Those who helped with the Underground Railroad were anything but naïve.

While visiting the historical Michigan Street Baptist Church in Buffalo, New York, we met retired former pastor Rev. William Henderson. Mr. Henderson told us that when a bounty hunter came before one particular

local judge seeking his signature on a warrant to recover a slave, the judge would excuse himself for a few hours to go to the bathroom or to lunch, until he could warn trusted workers in the Underground to help the slave escape. The judge would return to sign the slave hunter's warrant, as the law required, but not before ensuring the slave had time to run away! Rev. Henderson showed us a tiny hiding place in the church where slaves dared not sneeze, cough, whisper, or cry, if a rat ran across their foot when slave catchers were present. It's because people like Quakers, Presbyterians, and this judge saw it as their Christian moral obligation not just to oppose slavery, but also to do something about it, that so many slaves found their way to freedom.

But what began as a small-scattered minority of abolitionists grew into a movement that abolished slavery. Today we celebrate these heroes of the Underground Railroad as people who stood on the right side of history.

The question for us is whether we also stand on the right side of history. Are we doing all we can to light a candle, like John Rankin, to help today's underclass escape poverty, illiteracy, illness, and even death due to lack of resources and adequate access to education and health care?

Most especially, the Underground Railroad reminds us that every just cause requires sacrifice. While Joe and I were in Oberlin, Ohio, we visited the local cemetery where many important abolitionists from that community

are buried. One name particular stood out: that of Sabram Cox. Though he was a freed black, he would pose as a slave *so that slave hunters would be distracted and pursue him, allowing actual slaves to escape.* .

I think Cox serves as an important example for us in the church for two reasons. The obvious is his spirit of unselfish sacrifice, risking capture and his freedom. The second is that, while he posed as a slave, he knew he was a free man.

So, we in the church also need to remember we are freed women and men in Christ. *“For freedom Christ has set us free,”* the apostle says. So, we are to live as freed women and men for Christ, called out of Christian responsibility to liberate others from systems and practices of injustice that make poverty nearly impossible to escape for generation after generation within a family. Are we today’s “Moses” helping lead others out of their Egypt to the Promised Land?

There will undoubtedly be hills to climb, headwinds to face, obstacles to overcome. But if we are truly wise, we cannot hide our light under a bushel. We will offer ourselves in sacrifice and develop relationships of trust and love with those who are slaves to poverty so we may help lead them all the way home to the Promised Land of freedom and justice for all.