

Pentecost 15, Proper 19, Year B—RCL  
Trinity Episcopal Church  
September 13, 2009  
Theme: “All Aboard, Trinity!”

All Aboard, Trinity!

Who is this? (Hold up Thomas’s picture.)

Thomas the Tank Engine, that’s right. When Mrs. Bowen, our Deacon, first put Thomas on our flier for today’s service and potluck meal, she got a few raised eyebrows—but, in fact, Thomas is perfect for what we’re doing today.

Those of you who know Thomas know that he is part of a community, a community of engines, railcars, train and track equipment, a helicopter, a tractor or two, and a few people.

Who can name some of Thomas’s friends? (There’s Percy, Henry, Mavis, Diesel, Rusty . . .)

Are all the people in Thomas’s railroad community kind to each other?

Is anyone jealous of anyone else?

Is there any competition?

Do some people get their feelings hurt?

Are there rules? Do the rules get broken?

There’s Thomas, who tries hard but gets annoyed when people don’t do their jobs. He also gets jealous of Percy and some of the other engines who seem to be stronger or faster or shinier. There’s Diesel, who sneers at the steam engines, especially the little ones. There are the Cars, who bump and hold back and attempt to jump off the track to make life difficult for the engines. There are cows, who insist on standing on the tracks. There’s Mavis, who’s vain and doesn’t listen. There’s Henry, who works in the forest carrying logs, and who does his job no matter what. Then, there’s Rusty, rescued from the scrap heap and now very useful.

Useful is the key word—a useful engine is what Thomas and most of his friends aspire to become. To be useful has nothing to do with being glamorous, or shiny, or even brave. To be useful is to do one’s part, so that the whole community benefits. Thomas learns that even the smallest parts are important. Thomas and his friends learn how important it is to work together, to share the load, to make room for different kinds of engines, to be tolerant of cars, to appreciate the gifts each part of the railroad community brings, however rough and difficult some of those personages may be.

Is this beginning to sound like another kind of community? A Church, perhaps, like Trinity, maybe? It may not surprise you to know that the writer of the children’s stories which inspired the video series of Thomas the Tank Engine and Friends was a parish priest in the Church of England. To be useful, rather than clever, quick, or shiny, or the biggest and most powerful—to be useful is a way of talking about membership in the Christian community and the purpose for which we have been formed.

Listen to the Lesson from Proverbs for a minute—in this passage, we have Wisdom, personified as a beautiful woman, speaking to people in the public square. The people ignore her; she scoffs at them in return. Sifting through the animosity, however, we see that wisdom comes to us in the midst of our daily lives, and that to be wise—or useful—means that we have to pay attention. We have to let go of our narrow self-interest and our complacency. We need to look up from what we're doing and recognize the presence and the actions of others for the common good. To become wise means to have some self-understanding, particularly to realize that we need each other. Our lives are not all about our own self-development; to become who we're called to be, we need each other. Even if it's easier to do something on our own entirely, for the good of all of us we need to share the doing. What results may not be the perfection we might have managed to attain on our own, but what results will be the better and the stronger for shared vision and action—and probably more lasting, as well.

The Letter of James is even more pertinent—and what James describes is an issue for Thomas in the community of engines, just as it is an issue in the community of the baptized people which is the Church. James gives us a series of images to speak about the power of language in the Christian community. He speaks of horses with bridles and bits; ships with rudders—and, if he'd known about trains, I think he might have used the engine's power as an image, as well. He points out that a small blaze ignites a forest, as the people of California know to their sorrow. All of these images James uses to describe how a small part of our body, the tongue, can make such an impact on other people. We say things like, *Hold your tongue! I spoke without thinking. I had to bite my tongue.* We talk about half-serious words as *tongue-in-cheek*. We understand exactly what James is referring to in this passage. We can use our tongues, our words, to tame animals, to show love, to give support, and to wound deeply. A few ill-chosen words can destroy a person's reputation, stop a popular movement, tear a community apart. James stops short of telling us to live in silence, but he points out that blessings and curses are both works of our tongues—but only blessings build up the Body of Christ.

In the Gospel, Jesus and his disciples are in the region of Caesarea Philippi, a beautiful part in the north of Israel, where one of the sources of the River Jordan, the Baniyas, comes down out of the hills. The name of the place is absolutely Gentile, pagan, about Caesar and Philip the Tetrarch, although Philip is in heritage a Jew. In Caesarea Philippi, there's a grotto dedicated to the Greek god, Pan. When Jesus asks his question, But, who do you say that I am, he's in the midst of pagan life. For Peter to answer, "You are the Messiah," is incredibly powerful, especially given where this conversation takes place. Peter's tongue speaks rightly and clearly.

At the same time, when Jesus describes what will soon take place, Peter can't stand what he hears. He rebukes Jesus, with the same tongue he used to praise him, and Jesus calls him Satan. In the midst of that very pagan setting, Peter has set his mind on human things, all those things that describe beauty and success and earthly power. Jesus has set his mind on heavenly things—and his purpose, which is to be useful in a way no one has ever been, before or since.

Jesus is going to give himself fully for the life of the community. He's going to die, so that all of his friends then, and his friends now, will have a new kind of life. Jesus gives himself for the community, for us, so that we can give ourselves to the world.

All that sounds very far away, and, because of time and distance, not so difficult. We are, however, the Christian community in this time and place. We need to be kind. We need to be caring. We need to be useful.

In other words, we're not here for ourselves and our own individualistic concerns. We have those concerns; we have a personal relationship with God in Jesus Christ. We have gifts each and all of us given by the Holy Spirit. But our relationship with God must not stop with ourselves. Those gifts we've been given, to teach, to sing, to laugh, to see the truth, to love—those gifts can only be used in community, with other people. A community is not a family; it's not an organization like social or service or fraternal organizations. It's not a team, in the way a business or a sports organization functions. A community has elements of all these things, but a community's purpose is to look outside itself. Reaching out is the purpose of the Christian community. To be useful, as a useful engine, is not to seek glory for ourselves, but to do the work which makes things better for everybody else.

Community is not about deserving or earning or winning. Community is about serving, seeking Christ in others, turning the other cheek, letting go of grudges, and holding our tongues. No gossip, no slander, no curses—all very difficult; all very important.

We're on this journey together, for good or ill. We follow a track, but there are branches to take and decisions we need to make together. We have all our human issues of jealousy, fear, anger, and frustration. We bring all of who we are, grief and pain included with hope and joy. We are called to be a community, bumping along, stopping for cows on the tracks, traveling through hidden countrysides and the grubby parts of cities. We are called to catch the train and try hard to be useful—not the best, not the most beautiful, not the smartest—but useful, together.

All aboard, Trinity! We're rolling.

Amen.