

Free Fuel, Self-Service -- Pentecost Year B

“My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end, nor do I really know myself. And the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you, and I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire, and I know that if I try this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always. Though I may seem lost and in the shadow of death, I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

This prayer, written by the monk, Thomas Merton, guides us towards the places of justice and truth that God would have us call home. There is an inescapable and sobering aspect to this plan of God's, a paradox that can lead us either to a life of frustration or a life of joy. Because this home, to which God welcomes us (and which is free of rent or mortgage!) has no address. It's a spiritual Winnebago, that will never get stuck or break down, just as long as we keep the fuel tank full; it's a self-propelled, nuclear-powered Airstream of the heart; a four speed, dual quad, positraction four-oh-nine of the soul, but with great mileage.

Today is the day of Pentecost, the day we remind ourselves and each other of what kind of fuel this rig runs on: Premium, Ethyl, or as we say in Missouri, Hi-Test. This fuel is also known as the Holy Spirit, the Holy Ghost Power! To dig even deeper into this analogy, (help me Jesus) everyone who applies for credit at this Hi-Test gas station gets one; it's self-service, on the honor system, and we never get a bill 'til the end of the age.

Listen to these verses from the 12th Chapter of Isaiah, wherein our motor home is described in beautiful and passionate detail:

“Surely, it is God who saves me; I will trust in him and not be afraid. For the Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense, and he will be my Savior. Therefore you shall draw water with rejoicing from the springs of salvation. And on that day you shall say, “Give thanks to the Lord; call upon his Name. Make God’s deeds known among the peoples; see that they remember to exalt God’s holy Name.”

They didn’t have gas stations back then, much less Winnebago’s, but the image is very similar indeed. “You shall draw water with rejoicing...” Now in that time and climate, a safe and convenient source of good fresh water was just about the most important thing in the world. Just as it is here and now. Imagine a gas station, a water well, a source of supply that is always where we need it, and free. Talk about your springs of salvation. And our response will surely be both rejoicing and exalting. We can’t wait to tell everyone this glorious good news: Unlimited, free fuel for our journey, come one, come all.

But why a motor home; why can’t we do what Peter and the others wanted to do the last they found themselves on a mountaintop in the presence of God, build something and keep it to themselves forever? As we move through the New Testament story of the Church’s birth, we see God continually clarifying the nature of the gifts we are being offered. This life is not for guarding, keeping and securing. This life is for proclaiming, for demonstrating, for taking on the road. It is only truly ours as long as we are giving it away. Our life’s

journey will have all the fuel it can ever use, just as long as we accept that we are in truth just passing through.

We pass through many lands, encountering many people, each of whom speaks a unique language. Yet they understand us, and we them! Even though ever since the Tower of Babel, there are a thousand tongues, all of them are mutually intelligible beginning now at this Pentecostal moment, this springtime festival of love and inspiration. And those tongues become clearer to us every time we draw from this sweet, sweet well.

Jesus makes this abundantly clear to his disciples in today's Gospel lesson. 'I gotta go,' he says. 'I have to leave this campsite so that you can have it, and the next one, and the one after that. The fuel will keep on flowing back into your tank for as long as you shall live and far, far longer, but only as long as you keep traveling in my direction, keep following me towards the destination none of us can reach in a lifetime.' When Jesus declares "I have much more to tell you," this is our sure and certain instruction to stay on the move, looking for clues, establishing new landmarks in a landscape that is always changing. What Jesus has to tell us, we can only hear by taking new kinds of risks based on each new dawning day's observations, observations made with the creative, compassionate, open hearts are what draw us along the roads to happy destiny in the turbocharged, doublewide, fully loaded land yacht we call home, ever changing, ever true.

The absolute necessity of accepting our state of flux is never more apparent than at this time of year. Stunning displays of flowers and plant life, the greening of the trees and fields, that yield too suddenly to browning and thirst, the wild orchestras of birdsong, the comings and goings of the fishes, all

remind us of the cycles of change. But in our human lives, we are confronted by an even more bracing reality. My middle child, a daughter, came into town this past week for a two-day visit. She's headed to Alabama to do a job of work. She was as much fun as ever and the affection we share is humbling indeed, but she is gone now, and I don't know when she'll come around again. My youngest is just about to finish the school year and his summer plans will take him far away too. I find myself aware of empty rooms and uncertain reunion times. He too must go, in peace.

If I can be so moved by the peaceful comings and goings of my grown kids in a fast-paced global culture, how much more wrenching and horrifying must it be for parents whose children go off to war? The people we will memorialize tomorrow, the daughters and sons who left home forever, did they make sacrifices? Of course they did. But their loved ones left behind – oh what a road they must travel. Whatever we have to say about the conflicts in which our country gets involved, and with each new war they get more impossible to justify, gone is gone. Pride, patriotism, determination, sympathetic companionship, all of these help us deal with the grief, but gone is gone.

We visited the amazing castle monastery at Mont St Michel awhile back and in its shadow there is a German World War II cemetery. I stopped to look around a little, and there was nothing about politics in evidence, let alone the horror Naziism. What I saw were the names of a whole lot of teenagers who left home and didn't come back. The only choice for us who are bereft, whether insignificantly by the emptiness of our nests, or terrifyingly by the loss of a child soldier, is to keep moving, keep traveling on. And the only possible way we can do this is to drink deeply and often of the

sweet, sweet water Isaiah talks about, to keep our tanks topped up with that pure, free fuel, to listen ever more closely as Jesus' Word takes on new meaning for a new day, helping us reorganize our lives more closely to God's will through acts of justice, mercy and humility.

Merton's prayer speaks directly to us this day: "Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone." God has provided the Winnebago, the fuel, has given us roadmaps, scenery and companions. Today, the day of Pentecost we are reminded of our part in getting this rig on the road – we must allow ourselves to embrace whatever images make us internally combustible, we must listen to whatever language carburates our hearts and sparks our willingness to work for peace. Let us pray.

O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, our shelter from the stormy blast and our eternal home. You are with us in all the times of life to offer light and comfort, the fuel for our journey. We come to you now with thanks: thanks for our freedom; thanks for our prosperity and security. On this Memorial Day, we thank you, especially, for the women and men who gave themselves in times of war to help to ensure the blessings that we enjoy. The names, the faces, the stories come to us, once again, and we honor them, their courage, their sacrifice, their willingness to put themselves in harm's way for a better cause. May we never forget what they have done. Guide us in the ways of peace, that our children and children everywhere might leave home for peaceful adventures in your world as they will, but never again go off to war.