



# ST. MARK'S ON THE CAMPUS

## Episcopal Church & Student Center

1309 R Street \* Lincoln, NE 68508 \* (402) 474-1979 \* [www.stmarks-episcopal.org](http://www.stmarks-episcopal.org)

The Rev. Deacon Ryan Hall, Curate  
Sermon for the 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 18  
St. Mark's on the Campus  
September 9<sup>th</sup>, 2007

OT: Deuteronomy 30: 15-20	Psalm 1	Epistle: Philemon 1-21	Gospel: Luke 14:25-33
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### “The Cost of Discipleship”

“Swing Low, Sweet Chariot...coming for to carry me Home.”

Most of you have probably at some time in your life heard this old African American spiritual. Growing up in the South, its virtually impossible not to know some of these old hymns. They are on the radio, many Jazz pieces are based on this particular one, the first verse of which is:

“I looked over Jordan and what did I see? Coming for to carry me Home.

A band of Angels a comin' after me. Coming for to carry me home.”

(Verse quoted from the *Lift Every Voice and Sing II African American Hymnal* which the Episcopal Church puts out.)

I was reminiscing this week about my time in England last fall. I was an exchange student for a semester at Westcott House in Cambridge. I left a year ago today for that adventure in Jolly Old England. I was there for three months and one of the fondest memories I recall from that 3 month foreign exchange trip was an incident involving this particular hymn.

One of the Anglican churches in Cambridge had a gospel choir. It was a good choir, but being from the South, I was just always thoroughly amused at hearing fully vested British Anglican choir singing Southern Gospel hymns with East Anglia accents. It was a hoot.

Anyway, they were singing “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” one day as the offertory hymn. During coffee hour after church, I happened to strike up a conversation with a few of the choir members. It came out that I was originally from the American South and so they were curious what I thought about their gospel choir. And I asked them why they choose that particular song to sing.

They gave me various answers. “Swing Low Sweet Chariot”, like a lot of African American spirituals from the Antebellum Era, was full of a lot of rich theological imagery that would appeal to uneducated folks. That the song also had a nice sentiment and theological themes like Jesus' return and Elijah's Chariot, etc.

As we were having that conversation, it dawned on me that these folks had both the right answer and the wrong answer. The theological themes and all that they were saying were, in fact, exactly what affluent white people, specifically Episcopalians, were supposed to think the song was about. So in that way they were right.

However, do you actually know what the meaning of that song is really about? What's the most catching word in the song? Swing low, sweet *Chariot*.” The word Chariot was used very intentionally when the song was created. Because it rhymes with something... in fact, someone's name. Chariot rhymes with Harriet. Yes, as in Harriet Tubman... the abolitionist former slave who risked life and limb to time and time again to return South and help slaves escape to the North to freedom.

This song was essentially one big code word. Slaves working out in the fields would start singing this song. The slave owners or overseers, most of whom were Episcopalian I might add, would think it was just another song the slaves were singing. And hey, it's even good, they are singing about Jesus - nothing wrong with that. What the song really meant was that Harriet Tubman was in the area, coming to take somebody to freedom.

I bring all this up because the reading from the Epistle today has much of this same subversive element to it as the hymn “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” does, a fact that has largely been lost over the years. Some of you might not have even heard of the Epistle to Philemon. It is the shortest “book” in the Bible, if you can call it a “book.” Its only 335 words, more like a postcard really. It's only read on one Sunday every 3 years in the lectionary cycle.

Even though it's short, it really is a very rich letter. It is much more nuanced than it appears on the surface. On the surface it appears to be a letter of recommendation from the apostle Paul to Philemon

concerning this particular slave named Onesimus who was a runaway. Paul appears to be sending a runaway slave back to a slave owner.

Just like the song *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*, the letter to Philemon is just as subversive. A lot of the modern day critics of the Bible don't care for Paul. He sounds very much to modern ears as someone who moralizes a little too much and has an excess of ego in some respects. I think it's in *Phillipians* where Paul writes about being "a Hebrew of Hebrews... as to righteousness under the law, (I am) blameless."

I'll grant you that Paul was probably not the most likable person, but for all his warts, I think Paul's heart was in the right place. I believe Paul understood the two critical elements of discipleship:

1. Love is achieved through reconciliation
2. Christians are called to a discipleship as bearers of the reconciliation.

This was the case with Philemon and Onesimus. A runaway slave in the Roman Empire, if caught, was summarily executed unless a large monetary bribe was in play. The economics were such that a slave revolt such as the Revolt of Spartacus in AD 70 was not to be tolerated. This idea that an individual life had value was anathema to Roman thinking. Even the official name of the Roman Republic spelled out the social divide: *Senatus Populusque Romanus* (SPQR), i.e. The Senate and the People's Republic of Rome. Anything that would upset that order was put down harshly, as in the Good Roman principle: The good of the many outweighs the good of the few or the one.

Paul probably converted Philemon to Christianity, and by this letter is offering Philemon a rather remarkable choice. In fact, in terms of the Roman social order, it was quite shocking and subversive. To suggest that a runaway had any sort of value that merited being kept alive was almost revolutionary in itself. Paul goes even further in suggesting something unthinkable. To suggest that a slave owner treat a slave as a "beloved brother"... that would have been completely revolutionary to the Roman mind because the Ancient Romans had a very stratified social order, almost to the point of a caste system.

Paul, being Philemon's spiritual leader, could have ordered Philemon to release Onesimus. Paul could have, on his own moral authority, simply kept Onesimus in his service or helped him stay on the run. In the gospel today, Jesus talks about the cost of discipleship. Paul understood that being able to love

someone required reconciliation. Reconciliation, however, is painful and sometimes is not attainable even in the best of circumstances.

The world desperately needs reconcilers. Fewer people who stand on street corners and shout slogn. More people through whose risky and costly witness old scores can be buried, debts can be forgiven, ancient wounds healed. This is a call, then, for Christians and churches to be for the world what Paul was with Philemon and Onesimus.

And, yes, this is a very costly discipleship because we are sometimes called to bear the brunt of reconciliation. I give you the example of Desmond Tutu, the Anglican archbishop of South Africa who chaired the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which was set up immediately after apartheid fell so that people who committed atrocities in the name of apartheid could confess and be reconciled and given immunity. This was done in the hope that reconciliation would occur instead of all out civil war and strife.

One can debate how effective the Truth and Reconciliation Committee was, or even whether it was appropriate, but the point I am making is not about the Committee but about Tutu himself. Tutu chaired that Committee for almost two years and if you look at pictures of him through that time, his hair went completely white, and he developed crow's feet on his faith. After he stepped down, he learned he had developed cancer, something he's battled ever since. I believe that was directly because he was bearing the weight of discipleship, hearing crimes that rivaled in some cases things the Nazis did.

But Desmond Tutu, like Paul and Harriet Tubman, understood that the cost of discipleship is very high because the grace we have been given is a very costly grace. As we begin a new school year and the vestry begins looking at a new budget for the coming church year, let us give thanks we are surrounded by what the bible calls so "great a cloud of witnesses," meditate on what God is calling us to do, and let us ponder in our hearts how God is calling us to weigh the cost of discipleship.

Amen.