

## LET THE RIVER RUN

The Rev. J. Donald Waring  
Grace Church in New York  
Grace Church School Sunday  
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Jesus said, *“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”* (John 15:12-13)

Some years ago on summer vacation, my family and I made it as far west as Kansas City. One day we visited a place called the Arabia Steamboat Museum. The Arabia was a large paddle boat that plied the Missouri River in the 1850’s, ferrying supplies and settlers to the western frontier. In September of 1856 she was on a routine voyage when the submerged trunk of a walnut tree ripped open the hull, sinking the ship. All the valuable cargo was a complete loss. Fortunately, the Missouri River is not especially deep, so the upper decks of the Arabia still protruded above the water, allowing all 130 passengers to scramble there and be rescued. In the end, the only casualty was a mule on deck. The mule’s owner claimed that he untied the animal and tried to pull it off the ship. But the mule was too stubborn and perished.

By the next morning only the tall stacks of the Arabia were visible, and within days all traces of the ship had vanished in the soft mud and swift current. Then as the river itself shifted, no one could be sure exactly where the wreck even occurred. It wasn’t until 1987 – 131 years after the sinking – that a group of amateur explorers finally discovered the sunken steamboat, a full half-mile from the current river bank, 45-feet deep in a Kansas cornfield. Buried in the silt was a remarkably well-preserved time capsule of frontier life: canned pickles that are still edible, bottled perfumes that remain aromatic, clothes, shoes, tools, dishes, even two pre-fab houses ready for assembly on the prairie.

To me, however, the most interesting exhibit of all is the skeleton of a mule, still in its leather harness, still tied to a piece of equipment on deck. So the earth reveals the truth. The man who was the mule’s owner never came to the rescue. He saved himself and blamed the helpless animal for its own demise. His was a heart that the prophet Ezekiel would have called “a heart of stone.”

Today is a local feast day that is unique to this community. We call it Grace Church School Sunday. Once every year – lately the Sunday before Thanksgiving – we gather as many participants as are willing to celebrate the common history and mission between church and school. The tradition predates everyone currently here, so it would take an archival dig to unearth the original reasons for the day. I remember asking about the purpose of Grace Church School Sunday before my first experience of it, and someone explained it to me this way: the campus is like a big swimming pool. We have people splashing around in both the 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue and Broadway ends of the pool. But since it’s all the same water, once a year we need to meet in the middle and show each other that we’re all behaving ourselves.

I’m told that in days gone by the waters could be troubled. People in either end of the pool looked over at the other side and wondered: what *are* they doing over there? Suspicions developed. School folks feared that in the Broadway end of the pool, people promoted – well, let’s just say the word – religion: lots of it, of a particular sort, with long speeches and short parties. Likewise, church people feared that in the 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue end of the pool, the school was educating its students to be – well, let’s just say the word – Communists. Thus, come Grace Church School Sunday both sides would try to put on their best face. The school would cover every square inch of Tuttle Hall with exhibits of happy, benevolent student art. You could search for 131 years and never see an image of Marx, Lenin, Chairman Mao, or Che Guevara (it doesn’t mean they weren’t there, you just wouldn’t find them). Meanwhile, Morning Prayer and Sermon in the church would feature no

speaking in tongues, no threatening interpersonal witnessing, and no snake handling. It's a rule we generally abide by still: no snake handling on Grace Church School Sunday.

Hopefully, those days of suspicion and mistrust are behind us, and now we can really focus on why we are in this water together in the first place. Even if you're part of the school and have nothing to do with the church, or you're part of the church and have nothing to do with the school, we're in this water together. What are we trying to accomplish? Do we have a common mission, and if so, what is it? I believe the Scripture readings we've heard this morning can help. As you know, this year our additional duty and delight has been to celebrate the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the choir in its current format, which led to the founding of the school. One way we marked the moment was to restore the choir pews, which required taking them apart. To our surprise it was like opening a time capsule. Inside we found the chorister's letter that I wrote about in Friday's Epistle. We've also reprinted it in today's bulletin. Another item was a remarkably well preserved bulletin from 1921. I looked at the order of service for that long-ago day and saw that the readings were from Ezekiel 11 and John 15. When I read the passages I thought to myself, "Wow: those pickles are still edible! Let's serve them up on Grace Church School Sunday.

The Ezekiel reading (11:14-20) dates from the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, during the Babylonian exile of the Jews. Decades earlier the Babylonians had conquered Jerusalem and carried off most of the population to languish in internment camps. It was awful. By the waters of Babylon generations of Jews sat down and wept. They longed to return. But they'd been hearing troubling rumors about the remnant of their kin still in Jerusalem. Rumor had it that the remnant didn't want the exiles to return, even if they could. So the community was fractured, not only geographically, but also emotionally and spiritually. They feared they were finished. God was done with them.

What did the prophet Ezekiel have to say? He encouraged the exiles not to give up hope in God's future. Despite all appearances to the contrary, God was not finished with his chosen people. *Though I removed you far away among the nations, said the Lord God, I will gather you from the peoples, and assemble you out of the countries where you have been scattered ... and I will give you ... one heart, and put a new spirit within you; I will remove the heart of stone ... and give you a heart of flesh.* So God still had a mission for the people, and was at work in them through the exile. God was working to give them a new spirit and a new heart. Indeed, the exile was not a sign of God's abandonment. It was the very means by which God was forming them, and equipping them to fulfill their mission to transform the world.

The exiles did, in fact, return, and the new Jerusalem partly came. Six centuries later Jesus of Nazareth walked the earth. His calling was to fulfill the prophecy of Ezekiel, and demonstrate what it would really look like to live with the heart and the Spirit of the living God. He went to the margins of society – to the outcasts, the lepers, the unclean, the people no one else would touch – and in his dealings with them he taught his disciples the way of love. *This is my commandment,* he said to them, *that you love one another as I have loved you.* Then, before he went all the way to the cross and offered himself for the sins of the whole world, he said, *No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.*

Dare we say that we are coming close now to identifying what is a common mission between Grace Church and Grace Church School – something we are both trying to do? It seems to me that what the world needs today is, frankly, what the world always has needed: an infusion of people who have what Ezekiel called "hearts of flesh." The world needs an infusion of people who are committed to loving one another, even willing to dig deep and give of themselves. *No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.* At the same time, the world needs fewer people like the man who owned the mule on the steamboat Arabia. The world needs fewer people with hearts of stone, who save themselves, and blame others. Don't be that guy. *This is my commandment,* says Jesus, *that you love one another.* So producing people with hearts of flesh is a primary purpose of this combined community. We go about it in different ways as two institutions. But whether you swim with the church or swim with the school or swim back

and forth between the two, if you dip your toe in these waters, a new heart and spirit is what should be happening.

But a swimming pool? The problem with a swimming pool as a metaphor of our community is that a swimming pool goes nowhere. No matter how many laps you swim, no matter how much you splash around, you're still in the same place. Therefore, I propose that a better aquatic image for who we are is a river. The Psalmist (46) proclaimed, *There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God.* And the choristers have sung, *Let the river run. Let all the dreamers wake the nation. Come, the new Jerusalem.* If indeed we are like an ever-flowing river, we might imagine that the school, by design, occupies that brackish place downriver, where fresh water meets the ocean, where creeds are cloudy, where doctrine is doubted. Meanwhile the church occupies a place upstream, close to the source, where creeds ought to be crisp, where doctrine and devotion meet each other. The challenge to the church is to understand that downriver is where the school is supposed to be. The challenge to the school is not to lose sight of its source, upstream where the water is fresh and clear. We are all in this water together. We are one river in two places, and our common purpose is the new heart and spirit that are gifts from God.

Jesus said, *"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."* One person connected with this community who supremely fulfilled these words of Jesus was a woman whose life story we often tell. What she did is worth hearing again and again, and should be counted as one of the finest moments in our common history, never to be lost in the sands of time. Her name was Edith Corse Evans. She was a member of Grace Church in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries when the choir and school were new. She was a woman of wealth, known for her generosity of spirit as well as financial resources. In the spring of 1912 she was travelling in Europe and booked passage home on the maiden voyage of the greatest ship that had ever been launched: the RMS Titanic. Most everyone knows that as the Titanic raced across the North Atlantic Ocean, she struck an ice berg that ripped open her hull. The ship thought to be unsinkable began to sink.

Ironically, the Titanic carried more lifeboats than maritime law required, but it wasn't nearly enough to rescue everyone aboard. On deck, Miss Evans and another woman named Caroline Brown, whom she had befriended on the voyage, were among those desperately searching for a seat. They arrived at the last available lifeboat – Collapsible-D – only to be told that it had room for just one more woman. In the confusion of that terrible moment, Miss Evans did a most extraordinary thing: she pushed Caroline Brown into the boat and said, "Please take this lady. She has children." Caroline Brown tumbled into the lifeboat and lived. Just fifteen minutes later both the ship and Edith Corse Evans were gone.

One week to the day later, a great memorial service for Miss Evans filled these very pews. Caroline Brown herself was present, and spoke from the brass eagle lectern, telling the story of how Edith Corse Evans had laid down her life for hers. A plaque memory of Miss Evans was inscribed in the northwest corner of the nave. Another plaque, this one of brass, was affixed to the walls of Grace Chapel over on E. 14<sup>th</sup> St. where Miss Evans volunteered her time. Grace Chapel was closed in the 1940's and many of the memorials brought over here, including the brass plaque. It now hangs near the Honor Room, right next to the cubbies where the choristers keep their music. It includes the verse from John 15 we've heard today: *No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.*

I like to think that what Edith Corse Evans did was partly due to the heart of flesh that this community instilled in her. It is an ongoing community. It is a river that makes glad the city of God.

Let the river run.  
Let all the dreamers wake the nation.  
Come, the new Jerusalem.