

## ORPHAN TRAIN

SHERARD EDINGTON

Matthew 3:13-17

Charles Loring Brace was born in 1826 to a wealthy family in Litchfield, Connecticut. At age 16, he entered Yale College. Upon graduating, he entered Yale Divinity School to become a minister. However, after one year, he transferred to the more liberal Union Theological Seminary in New York City. Living in New York City among the poor was a transformative experience for Brace. Despite his parents' objections, he changed the emphasis of his studies from theological to practical. In other words, he gave up his plan to become a preacher to become a missionary, specifically focused on social reform.

In the 1850s, New York City was a place in desperate need of social reform. The population was growing rapidly due to a massive influx of immigrants who came mostly from Ireland and Germany. Poverty and disease were rampant in the city. In 1857, only one-quarter of the city had access to sewer lines. Most residents still used outhouses. The single leading cause of death was tuberculosis. The working class worked low-paying job in factories and textile mills. The homes of the working class were concentrated in crowded, dirty, slums. In the 1840s, developers began building brick structures specifically designed as tenements for multiple families. The average apartment in the Five Points neighborhood was just 225 square feet and housed five people. Many people refused to live in these tenements and chose to squat in shantytowns on the edge of the city. As you can imagine, conditions were grim.

What had to be the most noticeable aspect of life in New York in the 1850s was the children—specifically homeless children. It is estimated that at this time there were between ten- and thirty-thousand homeless children in New York City. By homeless I mean orphaned or abandoned. These weren't children living with families; they were alone. Their parents had died, or were in prison, or had just abandoned their children or given them up because of poverty. The children survived by selling newspapers, matches, and rags, and begging. James Hallahan became an orphan in Ireland where his parents died of starvation. At age 10, he immigrated to New York alone by himself. He survived working in mills and doing menial jobs. His story was not that unusual.

In response to the situation of the children of New York, in 1853, Charles Loring Brace established the Children's Aid Society. With the support of wealthy New Yorkers, the Children's Aid Society created a network of lodging houses around the city. It also established industrial schools to teach poor children a trade. However, Brace's most ambitious proposal—one that would change this country—is the one known as the Orphan Train.

What Brace determined was that the best thing he could do for the New York orphans was to get them out of the city, get them to the Midwest where there were open spaces and fresh air and, most of all, work. The farmers in the Midwest always needed more hands in the fields and Brace considered these farm families to be morally superior to the children's families. Brace began with a small town in Michigan—Dowagiac—where he had a personal connection. In 1854, he arranged that 45 orphans would be sent there to find new homes.

Back in New York, 45 children were cleaned up and given fresh clothes and then placed on a train. They traveled for several uncomfortable days with a chaperone from the Children's Aid Society. Once in Michigan, they were taken to the town's church and lined up by height. Adults came and inspected them and took them home to start a new life. This was the first of what became known as Orphan Trains. These trains would continue for the next 75 years transporting over 200,000 children from the East to the West. It is estimated to be the greatest migration of children in human history.

Other charitable groups copied Brace's program. The Catholic Church started their own trains because they objected that Brace was "baby stealing" by placing Catholic children in Protestant homes. However, at least one Catholic orphan discovered later in life that she was actually Jewish.

Many books have been written about the Orphan Train movement. Whether it was a good or bad idea is a topic for debate. However, I do believe that Brace's intentions were honorable although many of his social views were less than progressive. Today, we recoil at the idea of sending children out like this. But there were no government programs and the orphanages in New York were overwhelmed.

As for the children, as adults many admit that if they had stayed in New York they likely would have died. Out West, some children were taken in by loving families, while others were used as cheap labor. Some remained in the west raising families and living out their lives; some made their way back east. The program was far from perfect with children being separated from siblings and losing any connection they had with living relatives. Not all children on the trains were even orphans. For example, there is this story by Hazelle Latimer: "I'd just finished eating and this matron came by and tapped us along the head. 'You're going to Texas. You're going to Texas.' Well, some of the kids, you know, clapped and laughed. When she came to me, I looked up. I said, 'I can't go. I'm not an orphan. My mother's still living. She's in a hospital right here in New York.' 'You're going to Texas.' No use arguing." —Hazelle Latimer (Orphan Train rider)

In our reading for today from the Gospel of Matthew, we find the familiar account of Jesus being baptized in the River Jordan. Jesus' cousin John was a well-known preacher in the Judean wilderness outside of Jerusalem. To the many who

came out to hear him, John offered a baptism for the repentance of their sins, a ritual cleansing.

Jesus traveled from Galilee to be baptized by John in the Jordan. John objected to Jesus' request saying, *I should be baptized by you*. Jesus answers him that this is how it should be. By being baptized, they are doing what is *righteous*. Jesus goes into the water and is baptized. As he emerges from the water, the gospel tells us, *suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him*. Then a voice from heaven declares, *This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased*. Jesus is then led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

Baptism is the root of the Christian faith. As the Presbyterian Book of Order describes it, baptism is “a sign and a seal of incorporation into Christ.” We join the church through baptism. John Calvin said that baptism is a sign of God's wondrous grace, it is the outward sign of an invisible and inward grace. When I stand before you performing a baptism, you can't see God's grace, but you do see the sacrament and know it is there. As a seal, baptism is like the wax seal on an old letter; it identifies the sender. One who is baptized is marked by God.

Baptism is a sign and a seal that we have been chosen by God. Because we are chosen by God, Christians have long used the word adoption to describe what takes place in our baptisms. As people of faith, we are adopted by our creator much like those orphan children were adopted by families in the Midwest.

Spiritually, we come into this world as orphans, alone and belonging to no one. But through faith, we are placed on a train that takes us to our God. As Presbyterians, that faith doesn't even have to be our own. When we are baptized as infants—not even aware of what is happening—we are baptized on the evidence of the faith of our family and our church.

We don't have to be perfect or righteous to be claimed by God, because none of us are. When those children on the Orphan Trains arrived at their destinations, they were lined up and examined. Their hair and teeth were inspected. The boys were sometimes made to do push-ups to prove they were strong enough to work. God is different. God claims us as we are, whether we can do push-ups or not. God takes us despite our appearances. We are on the train, therefore we belong to God.

In our baptism, God speaks and says, *This is my child, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased*. For parents bringing their child to be baptized, or even for an adult being baptized, these words mark the beginning of a great journey on which they are about to embark.

For us here today, that journey continues. We have to remember that our baptism is God showing God's love for us. As the baptized children of God, we are called to live in ways that are distinct from the ways of the world.

*As the apostle Paul tells the Galatians, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:26).*

On this day we need to remember and rejoice in our baptism and celebrate the God who created us continues to claim us, continues to love us, continues to make us his own. Amen.