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Epilogue, Rolling Without Certainty, Transcontinental Finality, Summer 2017

Good morning, if you didn't know already, I'm Tim Long, member of Trinity since 2014, and this past summer I completed a self-supported transcontinental journey across the country by bicycle. Well, not entirely- my friend Jim Lewis from Kansas joined me partway into Kentucky. So, this morning I'm going to talk about that journey, both the geographical and the spiritual; and, weaving within the story, what this community, what Trinity Episcopal Cathedral means to me.

Imagine dragging that vintage Schwinn Collegiate 10-speed out of the back of your garage, pumping up the tires, oiling the chain, and convincing your 50 pound grandchild to climb on back; or, lacking a willing grandchild, a bag of Sakrete, and pedaling out Trinity's north parking lot, over to Main Street, plummeting to the bottom at 30 miles an hour, brakes squealing at the load, and being totally exhilarated. Then, a couple of left turns, and pedal the whole works back up Brady at 3 miles per hour. Roll over to Main, fly down, turn left, and left, and back up again. Repeat the process for the next 30 days. I'd suggest early August to capture the heat and humidity. After a couple hours of this, stop in at that Shell

convenience store at the top of the hill, and be exceedingly grateful to be inside, and buying Gatorade, and Ensure and whatever food they have left on the rotisserie. Get used to being soaked through to your socks with sweat, and hoping for rain. Any rain. And be utterly surprised by the grace of strangers having little more than a worn-out car to their name, extending kindness, or unsolicitedly extending a prayer for a safe journey.

1,200 miles on this final leg, 4,500 calories and 60 miles a day, 11 mph average, on a Surly Disk Trekker, a steel touring bike with 27 gears, the lowest of which takes 909 turns of the pedals to cover a mile going uphill, 85 pounds loaded, with camping gear, and all the liquid I could carry and drink. I met other touring cyclists on the Transamerica Route, here from England, the Netherlands, France, Germany, Russia, and Wisconsin. I overnighted at campgrounds, homes, in church halls, fire stations and hotels that ran from 1960's mom and pop places, to a 3-star place on my last night in Williamsburg, Virginia, just before I caught Amtrak to head for home. I didn't have a single puncture, but I did blow out a right inguinal hernia, for which there will be a tire-patching event of sorts next week. Exhausting, exhilarating, and challenging of both my physical and emotional endurance.

This final leg of the cross-country journey was everything I'd anticipated it would be, based on my experience crossing the American West, and yet more, and different. I was different. Unlike the western part of this ride, where the journey was, truly, about saving my life, I set out last June with my friend Jim from my front yard in Rock Island in gratitude for the ability to accept the graces in life that flow to us, to me, for whatever it is that comes. And besides that, I'd told a lot of you that I was doing it, so I had to go.

A relevant sidebar: Somewhere in the middle of Kentucky, I started to meet westbound cyclists bringing stories of the semi-feral dogs from the hills and hollers ahead of me. There was one bicyclist, a 20-something fellow on holiday from his postal job in Sochi, Russia, who stopped to share information like every other touring cyclist does. He pulled a dog repellent spray out of his jersey pocket and asked, in his heavily accented English, "do you ave one of thees? Thees stopped a beeg dog from hurting my foot. Not even in Russia do we have dogs such as thees". I assured him I had a can of Mace sufficient to drop a meth addict, but I heard this story again and again. It seems there's a large Chou - Shepherd mix that had unseated a number of cyclists this year already, all while its owner sat back on his porch and watched with cynical bemusement. I was with a small group of cyclists one night at a church hall in eastern Kentucky, including a chaplain from

the Dutch army, where we actually discussed means to permanently dispatch this animal, until we actually heard ourselves .

I raise this point because it's illustrative of my greatest take-away from the month on the road. Eastern Kentucky, like much of the Appalachian region, yielded wealth from extractive industry. Coal, and to a lesser extent, lumber. Fortunes made and lost; the generations who'd earlier lived off the land, found that the sale of mineral rights, and paychecks from mining and lumbering brought relief from the thin and sporadic income from farming and whiskeying. Extraction of wealth from the land takes from the people, too. Cash for mineral rights, cash for hours at hard labor, anticipating a better future. Hasn't generally worked out. I saw many homes that needed a roof twenty years ago, and memorably, a house with a faded, handmade sign advertising weekly yard sales. One of many such places, the entire front porch of this house was stacked two trash bags deep and six feet high with yard sale stuff, as if to help keep the world away from the windows.

One afternoon, a 30-year old pickup truck passed me, blue smoke rolling off a howling front tire, and just 50 yards ahead, the front wheel- hub, axle and all, sheared off and bounced down the road and into the deep ravine, likely to remain there with all the other dead car parts along the way. Its elderly passengers stepped

out to survey the situation with defeated resignation. Their truck died blocking the highway. Most cars and trucks in rural Kentucky quietly expire in their driveways or yards where they stalled for the last time. One morning, in a county seat town, the best food alternative to the convenience store was a little two-window place with a picnic table in the gravel parking lot, called the Chicken Hut, from which an older woman made her living, and for me, made lunch. It was the better alternative to the C-store or the half-stocked grocery across the street.

So there it was- hundreds of miles of houses with the roofs settling back to earth, the cars with trees growing out the windshields, the guy in his thirties going on Methuselah for age, with his insides burned out clear to his eyeballs from that one more hit of meth. And he wasn't the only one in crushed, silent witness before me that day. But then,

The Freeda Harris Baptist Center is just a day's ride west of the Virginia border in a valley at Lookout, Kentucky. The Center is listed on the Transamerica Route maps as a place that welcomes cyclists to overnight, sleeping in beds in its hostel, or camping on the grounds. They offer showers, flush toilets, and a kitchen, too. I arrived to find Fred and Erika there, a grandfather – granddaughter pair I'd crossed paths with earlier in western Kentucky, who had, in real ways, saved each other's

lives and were honoring that and one another with a cross-country journey, too.

The afternoon I arrived, the Center was lively with Vacation Bible School – young kids in VBS tee shirts and new sneakers, being led in sing-a-longs and play by volunteers down from Ohio. I had the opportunity to learn about the Center’s work from one of its directors, a retired RN and recent widow, whose light-hearted, hopeful energy belied her age and her loss, and the setting; but also,

There are dulcimer festivals. And the bright spot of culture, education and hope that is Berea College, on the west slope of the Kentucky Appalachians, free to kids from the region. And the fellow at the Chicken Hut who went out of his way to ask about me and my life and offered to fill my water bottles with ice and water, who, if he was our son, would have had the \$6,000 of dental work done to restore his teeth to match his otherwise unaffected smile. And the elderly couple, who probably had little more than the old car they were driving, a car worth less than my over-loaded bicycle, who made a point to ask where I was going, and why, and who my people were, and prayed, unsolicited, over me, for my safety and my return home, and for their thankfulness for our having crossed paths. And that gym at Freeda Harris, full of little kids, who were pretty glad to have some light-hearted activities and new, bright red T-shirts with a message to them straight from Jesus, just for them; kids who lined up a block long to come to the Center’s gym in

December so they could pick out a Christmas present for their mom, or grandma, so they could give something to the one person in their lives that tried to be there. The Center, where they annually serve Thanksgiving dinner, cafeteria-style to seven or eight hundred people in family groupings who wouldn't otherwise have Thanksgiving. Or the 60-something guy, with the road-weary, 30-year old Harley Davidson on his way home from his shift at the state prison, who turned around and came back to where I'd taken a break in the shade by an abandoned church, and we spoke of past losses, and finding our way; or, more correctly, of the "way" finding us, talking as if we were long-lost brothers, or had been in the same rifle squad, or in some lifeboat.

The morning of my last day in Kentucky, I gathered myself up at the Baptist Center, packed, ate cold cereal, and determined that I was going to skip the Blue Ridge Parkway, with its series of three enormous climbs, and cut the distance to Yorktown by 150 miles by taking a federal highway straight across Virginia, instead of northeasterly through Charlottesville. For days I had been dreaming about boarding an Amtrak coach in colonial Williamsburg, Virginia, to head north, and then back west from Albany: I so wanted to step off the train onto the platform in Princeton, Illinois, and to be home. That last week on the bike was a blur of 80 and 90 mile days, and whatever motel I could lite in at days' end, several times at

dusk, and just grinding out the miles. The terrain wasn't as flat as I'd led myself to believe. At all.

The destination at Yorktown, and the beach on Chesapeake Bay was about right: 97 degrees, I'm pouring sweat and stifling sobs of relief and gratitude that came out of nowhere, as I pushed the Surly across the sand and into the salt water of the bay amongst the swimmers' beach towels, umbrellas and coolers. Unbelievably, I was greeted by a parishioner from Grace Episcopal Church, Yorktown, who helped me find lodging in another parishioner's garage loft for the night. I accepted a lift from him back to Williamsburg the next day, and was on board Amtrak a couple of mornings later, my bicycle and all my gear packed and shipped, all except for my handlebar bag with a toothbrush, razor, and a change of underwear. The coach seat was roomy, the train air-conditioned, and marvelous.

There's something about traveling, alone, on an insignificant 40 pound assemblage of steel, and aluminum, and rubber, at a fifth the speed of an automobile. You're open, vulnerable. You can't readily drive on, or change your mind about your destination at 6:00 in the evening, and look for that better Expedia deal, or some "nicer" place. You are where you are, and you can't handily change that. Except that I could, almost anytime I wanted, within a day. Get yourself to a train station

or airport, swipe a credit card, and be anywhere in easy comfort. Easy credit magic for those of us with privilege.

The fellow with the bicycle-eating Chou probably couldn't, and neither could the fellow fetching me ice at the Chicken Hut, or the folks picking up an extra \$20 or \$30 with their weekend yard sales. I can only attempt to imagine that watching fit, healthy-looking folks with good teeth pedal by on \$1,500 bicycles with \$500 panniers, \$400 pack tents, and bright, spiffy jerseys; cyclists with the wherewithal to take months of time off to travel to gain "an experience" on two wheels, might just be galling when your teeth, or your back, or your lungs, or your very heart hurts with an ache that can't be set aside with a prescription, or a drink, or another hit.

On the train ride home, a country song found its way to my iPhone's music selection: Emmylou Harris' "Red Dirt Girl", describes crushed hope, the despair and exhaustion I saw way too often at convenience stores and gas stations in the mid-south: "*...nobody knows when she started her skid, she was only 27 and she had five kids; coulda been the whiskey, coulda been the pills, coulda been the dreams she was tryin' to kill,,,*".

And yet, there are those I met who had the great grace of acceptance, and found contentment where they were, and with what they had.

I live comfortably. More comfortably than most people in this country, and far more than most people on this planet, likely more than I deserve: I have the health and ability to do meaningful work. I reside in a comfortable bungalow on a pleasant street. I have a reliable car to drive and a smattering of vintage bicycles. I have enough clothes for any occasion. I have the affection and care of my fellow parishioners at this great Cathedral and place of worship; the familiarity and honesty of long-term friends; the love of people for whom I care, and, the great fortune of my life that is my two sons. And yet, I ventured out on journeys of discovery, three years ago, and then again this past June, driven, in looking back, for the grace of acceptance, and of transformation.

And what, you should ask, did I find? What I found is that on those mornings when I didn't think I could get down the road again, a stranger at some bedraggled convenience store would extend a greeting, a kindness. I found that when I gave in to weariness and frustration, I failed to see the beauty and wonder in the landscape and with the people who made their lives and found God there. I found, when I let go of trying to control the outcomes for the day, and gave myself over into the

hands of God, I could see individuals, who despite awful odds and minimal resources, were grateful and extending of themselves to the betterment of other, even more vulnerable people, or kids, and that in so doing, they were transformed.

Again and again, in my exhausted, vulnerable state, I found myself deeply moved, and although I had to look it up, I was reminded of the words of the Lord, from the prophet Isaiah, when he challenged his congregation who'd become overly focused on appearances and lost sight of their mission:

“Will you call this a fast,

a day acceptable to the Lord?

⁶ Is not this the fast that I choose:

to loose the bonds of injustice,

to undo the thongs of the yoke,

to let the oppressed go free,

and to break every yoke?

⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,

and bring the homeless poor into your house;

If you do those things, your righteousness will go before you.”

And by their witness to me, and with my biases and doubts diminished by exhaustion and finally in daily prayer, I was transformed. Transformed to move

toward becoming the person our creator would have us be. To not surrender and throw up my hands in the face of so much want, and heartache, and addiction, and human failing, but rather, to find my way home. Home to my friends, home to those I love, home to this place and to all of you. Home, in this lifeboat to extend kindness toward others, to walk in their shoes, to diminish the want and frustration and maybe even loss of hope, so that someone else, unexpectedly, might discover the glory of God in their life, and the acceptance of grace that frees us, frees me, from our sins and failings. I cannot so easily turn away from the want before me. The “good excuses” that I had for not doing something to diminish someone’s desperation churn in my guts now. And maybe, from here on, the Almighty won’t have to send an angry man’s dog, ready to throw me off my bike, to startle me into awareness of my privilege, and of the want that surrounds me, and open my eyes, and my heart.

A very short prayer in conclusion:

God, let me go forth to do the work you have given me to do. Thus endeth the lesson. Thank you for letting me share this with you. Amen