

"Wrong Way on a One-Way Street"

Joel 2:11-14; Galatians 1:11-17

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

September 7, 2014 – 13th Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

One of the strangest plays in football has to be when a player runs the wrong way with the ball. It happens rarely, but is most likely after a fumble recovery. The ball comes loose, a player spins around, scoops it up, and then heads full-speed toward the goal line—the **wrong** one.

Now everyone knows this hapless fellow is headed the exact opposite of how he should be going. But there he runs, undeterred, streaking down the sideline. This happened in the 1929 Rose Bowl when a California defensive back picked up a bouncing ball and headed 70 yards down the field toward his own goal. Fortunately a teammate had enough speed to tackle him a few yards shy of crossing into the end zone. Only then did the player realize his near-tragic mistake.

In this week's reading from Galatians, Paul relates to the people how he was once running in the wrong direction. "You have heard of my earlier life in Judaism," he writes, "how I persecuted the church of God and was trying to destroy it, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my ancestors."

Paul is a lot like that football player we just described. After running long and hard in the wrong direction, he was "tackled" on the road to Damascus. He was literally knocked down. Paul was turned completely around that day and spent the last half of his life running in the right direction. Yet, it took such a decisive intervention to open him to this complete change.

At first those early Christian congregations had trouble believing that Paul had made such an about-face. Many had suffered at his hands and they were loath to accept his supposed repentance. Once burned, they were not anxious to find that this "change" was a deception to gain their confidence, then to persecute them. They were wary to say the least. And who could blame them?

In time Paul was able to prove his sincerity. He risked his life over and over preaching the Gospel. He was one of the greatest single influences on the development of the early church. Clearly, God used him to advance the work started by Christ.

The Greeks have a word for what Paul experienced. It is *metanoia*, which literally means a change of mind or a change of direction. It indicates acknowledging one's errors and seeking a new orientation and path. It is a rethinking of one's situation and a determination to chart a different course. The Latin word *conversio* carries the same meaning and is the base from which we get our word "conversion."

Now our Old Testament text from the prophet Joel speaks of conversion, too, or at least the need for it. The people have been guilty of moving away from God, doing the wrong things, making self-serving decisions. They, too, have been headed the wrong way, and so the Lord implores them:

"Yet even now return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord your God for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love."

The Bible is full of examples of those who are totally on the wrong track and don't realize their folly. It shows them confidently forging ahead, often oblivious of their error. Sometimes they're quite content, enjoying themselves at the expense of others. Sometimes they're miserable and realize there's something wrong, but are either unable or unwilling to change.

At the entrance to some freeway ramps you'll notice prominent traffic signs, white letters on a red background, which say "wrong way." They leave no doubt because it's known that people can get confused and attempt to make an illegal turn. Once on a freeway going the wrong direction, it's not easy to get turned around and is fraught with disaster.

It would be helpful if life could be as well marked along the way. You know, a sign here or a sign there that says "take this way" or "don't go that way." It would surely make our daily life easier. Of course we could still choose to go the wrong way if we decided to, but we clearly would know it to be a bad choice.

Some years ago a Methodist bishop had the habit of asking his pastors to give an accounting of their ministry at the annual meeting. One by one he asked each preacher how many souls had been converted by them since their last gathering. Now, of course, this is a place where a parson might feel a bit tempted to embellish his good work and the bishop was quite aware of this, so he listened very closely to what each reported.

At some point in his career he was reassigned to the state of West Virginia. Even though he was new to the area, he decided to continue his traditional question when he presided over his first conference there. "How many souls," he asked, "have been converted under your ministry since last year."

As one after another reported high success, the bishop began to quickly add the figures together and realized that the total had exceeded all known Methodists in the whole of West Virginia and was quickly approaching the population for the entire state.

Just before the next fellow got up to report, the bishop—by now quite perturbed—stopped the proceedings. He obviously thought he was being taken for a fool, so he asked the next preacher before him how such extraordinarily high figures could be explained. "Well, bishop," the man said, "down here you have to convert them several times each year."

Well, that just goes to say that even when we get on the right path, there's something in our human nature that seems to take us off track periodically. Often it's such a gradual deviation that we don't notice it for some time. Yet, we begin to sense that life isn't going right. We're not satisfied. Things aren't turning out the way they should. The joy in living is being wrung dry. We know there's something wrong, but may overlook the obvious answer.

So, is there anything to be done? I would say **yes**, and it all begins with awareness of our predicament and a desire to do something about it. Second, we have to see this as a spiritual dilemma and not just look for a quick fix from the world around us. Often seeking more pleasure brings us anything but.

When we stop going against the flow of life and discover anew our relationship with God, good things start to happen. We might experience this as an abrupt turn-around or just bringing ourselves back little by little into spiritual balance; either way, it's a corrective which can give us a renewed sense of direction and purpose.

In *A Christmas Carol* Dickens provides us with a classic case of turnaround. Ebenezer Scrooge is a crotchety, stingy, unhappy man who one day does a complete about-face. After his moment of decision Scrooge truly becomes a new person. The novel describes it like this:

"He went to church and walked about the streets and watched children hurrying to and fro, and patted children on the head and questioned beggars, and looked into the kitchens of houses and up to windows; and found that everything could yield him pleasure. He never dreamed that any walk-- that anything-- could yield him so much happiness."

The reality is that, at times we all will get off our true path. The challenge is to keep alert, to be more aware, so that we don't suddenly look up in unfamiliar territory and wonder how we got here. Should we then find ourselves on the wrong road, we need to remember that the right road is still there for the taking.

Here's the good news. Jesus promises to show us the better way and, with confidence in his direction, we can put our trust.