

"WRONG WAY. ON PURPOSE"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
January 17, 1999

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TEXT: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs".
(Matthew 15: 24, 26)

INTRODUCTION

Keep the text in mind, but go with me for a few moments to the 17th of July, 1938. Douglas Corrigan has just topped off the fuel tank of his tiny 1929 Curtis - Robin monoplane. Minutes later he is airborne from the Floyd Bennet Airfield on Long Island. His plane is hardly "state-of-the-art". His cabin door has been tied shut with some old baling wire and two compasses comprise the sum of his navigational instruments. Corrigan's flight plan is to "go west" across the interior of our country. Long Beach, California is his announced destination.

But "on the way" something goes wrong. Seriously wrong and twenty-nine hours later he touches down near Dublin. Not Dublin, Ohio. Not Dublin, California. The real Dublin. Dublin, Ireland. Remarkably Corrigan had flown east instead of west, across the Atlantic. Now, believe it or not, but it actually happened. July 17th, 1938. Raise a hand if you remember it. That was the day the flier earned the title, "Wrong Way" Corrigan!

DEVELOPMENT

How does one explain such a navigational blunder? Corrigan said that one compass did not work at all and that the other malfunctioned, pointing his plane 180 degrees in the wrong direction. For nearly sixty years, until his death in 1995 at the age of 88, Corrigan forever insisted that he was SURPRISED to see the smiling faces of the Irish upon landing his plane...instead of sun-tanned Californians. Do you believe it?

But, on the other hand, there is good reason to believe that Corrigan's famous flight was hardly a mistake. Lindbergh's solo flight across the Atlantic occurred on May 21st, 1927. And Corrigan, fascinated by Lindbergh's feat, learned to fly. He paid \$ 310 for the monoplane, which his friends once described as a "crate". By 1938 still only ten pilots had matched Lindbergh's pioneer flight across the Atlantic. And Corrigan longed to become one of the first dozen pilots to fly the Atlantic.

But he ran into a problem. The Department of Commerce inspected his plane and rejected his request for a trans-continental flight plan. The airplane, they said, was unsafe. It didn't pass inspection. Slipshod. Low quality. Dangerous. No way and so Corrigan's dream of crossing the Atlantic thus postponed, he accepted the government's ruling and announced his intentions to "go west"...to go home. Time to relax...time to retool. And so he climbed into his crate and took off for California. But something "happened" on the way and he landed in Ireland. He was straight-faced and twinkle-eyed in his insistence that the Emerald Isle was not his intended destination. But you know...everyone suspected...NO, everyone knew that Corrigan had gone the wrong way - intentionally, on purpose. On July 17th, 1938 Douglas Corrigan achieved international celebrity. He was widely regarded as a hero of adventure and daring.

But, as far as I know, there was no "ticker-tape" parade up Broadway for him.

JESUS AND THE "WRONG WAY"....ON PURPOSE?

Now...where is all of this taking us? Come back with me to the text and let's see what's there behind it. It almost seems that there were times when Jesus went the "wrong way"....on purpose! I think this is one of those times. So much of this story...well, it seems wrong...and out of place with what we know of the ministry of Jesus...out of character with what we know of His spirit and attitude. The story doesn't "feel right"...it's ~~wrong~~.

To begin with, this is the only instance in the Four Gospels of Jesus stepping outside of Israel. Tyre and Sidon are situated on the coast of the Mediterranean, in Phoenician territory, populated for the most part by non-Jews. That's the "wrong direction" for the One who defined His mission narrowly as "ONE" who "went only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel".

To that add this curious dialogue around which the narrative has been constructed. I think the word "curious" is hardly descriptive enough...perhaps a stronger word is needed. How about "rude?" Really, what are we to think about Jesus looking this woman in the eye and calling her, and her family, and her people, "DOGS". That's what He did! Upon her appeal for assistance, Jesus says to her...."Lady"...

"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."
Jesus is telling this woman in so many words..."Look, my compass is not pointing in the direction of Phoenicia...it's pointing in the direction of Israel".

Are these words of Jesus something of a "Messianic tirade", kept well hidden from our view until we hit chapter 15 of Matthew. It really seems so out of character with the Lord we have come to know, to love, to follow...but it gets worse...it gets downright nasty for when this woman gets bold enough to add a few extra words to her plea for help, Jesus brushes her off and says:

"It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs!" Ouch. Jesus. That hurts.

Using that sort of insensitive and politically incorrect language could earn Jesus a bundle of demerits. Is Jesus really suggesting that this woman and her demon possessed daughter should be excluded from His ministering touch...on the grounds of their race, their nationality. His words tend to come across as hurtful and uncaring. "Throw it to the dogs". That's not the "Christ-spirit".

LISTEN CAREFULLY

Now...if you put your ear down next to the page and listen carefully...why you can hear the Pharisees and the Scribes applauding in the background. Hear them. That's a rather unusual cheering section for Jesus. They were His fans that day. Usually, they were His regular antagonists and constant irritants. Suddenly the boos and hisses turn into shouts of congratulations. Can't you hear them...

"Hey,....Jesus...~~way~~ to go. Now you're talking, man....we're with you. Tell that Gentile woman to get lost...shoo her away. Keep up this kind of talk, Jesus, and we'll let you join our gang."

HARD TO BELIEVE

It's hard to believe....the scribes and the Pharisees cheering for Jesus. There's something wrong here... seriously wrong. Doesn't sound like the New Testament we've grown up with... King James' version or not. That normally steady compass of our understanding of Jesus is malfunctioning, pointing 180 degrees in the opposite direction.

And so wrong does this passage seem to Bible students that numerous "rain-dances"...theological ones, that is...have been attempted. There are those who have suggested that it's not genuine at all, a mere fabrication of the early church. Others see it as "evidence" of the human side, the human nature of Jesus. Maybe He was tired, weary and His impatience was showing....maybe that accounts for this "rude" rejection. It happens. Others suggest that perhaps Jesus was only testing her...her resolve...to see how badly she wanted the gift.

ANOTHER SOLUTION

But let me offer another possible solution. It may appeal to you. I wonder if Jesus could have been saying these things to this woman "tongue in cheek"...you know, with a bit of a twinkle in His eye. Remember how Corrigan insisted that his mission was to California, even though he landed on the Emerald Isle. Everyone knew he had come the wrong way....ON PURPOSE. He probably flew over the "blarney stone" on his way. "Wrong way?" "On Purpose?" I wonder...did Jesus do the same?

Years ago as a student at New College in Edinburgh, Scotland, I was introduced to this "tongue in cheek" interpretation, offered by the well-known Scots commentator, William Barclay.

Barclay saw evidence for this "light touch" in the Greek word that Jesus used for dog. He described the "word" as a diminutive, and not the offense word which might be used for those frightening, scavenger dogs...roaming and hunting in packs...but rather of the pet "lap dogs"...the small type of dog. For us, the poodle. Barclay writes,

"The tone and the look with which a thing is said make all the difference. A thing which seems hard can be said with a disarming smile. We can call an old friend a rascal or a villain or worse. Our smile and tone take all the sting out of it and fill it with affection. We can be quite sure that the smile on the face of Jesus and the compassion in His eyes robbed the word of all insult and all bitterness".

I like that interpretation. In other words, perhaps Jesus said, "Oops, I've come the wrong way...." in the same sense that Corrigan spoke identical words to the smiling Irish faces. But the world suspected...no - even more... THE WORLD KNEW! They knew with a single glance into Corrigan's excited eyes that he had fulfilled his higher purpose. He was right where he wanted to be. Did Jesus have the same look in His eyes? Might this woman have caught the same glimmer of playful hope in His searching and loving eyes. I'd like to think she did.

"I've come the wrong way. I am not among the children of Israel, to whom My spiritual food and blessing belong. I find myself among the 'dogs', but if you look closely in My eyes, My excitement will betray that this was My intention all along." Wrong way - On Purpose.

HER RESPONSE AND HIS

Maybe the tone of His voice gave away His real purpose, or perhaps it was His body language...that's possible. Maybe it was His inflection. We don't know for sure, but apparently the woman noticed the "open door" in all of this. But through the rough exterior of His words, she saw the goodness of His true intent...the warm smile, the reassuring stance and she responds, "Yes...but even the dogs eat the crumbs of such goodness....I will be happy with the crumbs..."

And then Jesus bursts forth with exuberance, saying, "Here is a grand example of faith. Your daughter is healed". And the curious thing is at this point, this passage which seemed so terribly wrong now seems so wonderfully right, foreshadowing the expansion of the Gospel "to all nations, to all people, to all points of the compass".

And it reminds us that there is no point on that compass which when we take the Gospel in that direction, will ever be the wrong direction. If some consider it wrong to take the Gospel to a people of a different country, or a different race, or a different nationality, or a different socio-economic grouping....then let us intentionally GO THE WRONG WAY. ON PURPOSE.

WRONG WAY. ON PURPOSE

What all of this is suggesting to us is that sometimes we are called to go the wrong way - on purpose. Sometimes Christians are called to go against the grain of accepted practice. Jesus did. He allowed His hungry disciples to prepare food on the Sabbath in contradiction to the accepted tradition of the scribes and the Pharisees, thus elevating human need above the demands of the Law.

And remember, too, how on another occasion He healed a man's shriviled hand on the Sabbath. The scribes were not at all happy over these deviations from the rules any more than the government inspectors were happy about Corrigan's ignoring their decision. They played the game by the rules and would not be happy or amused by Jesus coming into contact with a "gentile" woman. Defiling. Low quality. Slipshod activity for a Jewish savior. But Jesus firmly stood His ground and showed us that acts of love and mercy and acceptance must at times be elevated above acts of proper procedure and of strict adherence and obedience to the Law and our traditions.

Jesus seemed to have a pretty good sense of when to violate tradition, when to head the "wrong way, on purpose". He seemed to do it whenever He was in pursuit of higher objectives. Remember, too, that He has come the wrong way for each of us....think of Bethlehem, for a moment...and how wrong does it seem that the Creator of this vast universe was born in a lowly stable. Surely Bethlehem was not in the recorded flight plan of God. And what about the cross. There again....it seems out of place. God's Son hanging on a cross...how wrong that seems. Yet, it was part of His merciful mission and flight plan to come the wrong way. On purpose, too...mind you. For our redemption. As our example. So, as you go on from here, remember this gospel narrative, this incident and let it speak to you of the "wrong way - but on purpose" for you and for me.

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your nearness and presence, O God. Wrestle with us in the hidden corners of our lives where so often dark shadows lie...cluster, below the surface. Anxiety. Fear. Impatience. Indifference...such often prevent us from moving into the light and love of His Kingdom of right relationships. All of this we ask in the name of Jesus, in whom we see life's highest hope as well as its deepest meaning. Amen.

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