

14th Sunday after Pentecost
Text: Matthew 15:10-28
Preacher: The Rev. R. Bruce Todd

St. Peter's - Lafayette Hill, PA.
August 17, 2008

“Doing the Right Wrong-Thing”

July 17, 1938. Douglas Corrigan tops off the fuel tank of his tiny 1929 Curtis Robin monoplane. Moments later Corrigan is airborne from the East Coast's Floyd Bennett Airfield. The plane is hardly state-of-the-art. His cabin door is literally tied shut with baling wire. Two compasses comprise the sum of his navigational instruments. Corrigan's flight plan was to head west across the interior of the United States. Destination? Long Beach, California. But something goes wrong. Seriously wrong. Twenty-nine hours later Corrigan lands his monoplane near Dublin. Not Dublin, California. The real Dublin. Dublin, Ireland. Remarkably, Corrigan has flown east instead of west, crossing the entire Atlantic Ocean. Believe it or not, it actually happened on July 17, 1938. That's the day the flier earned the title, "Wrong Way" Corrigan. How does one explain such an obvious navigational blunder? Corrigan claimed one compass did not work at all and the other malfunctioned, pointing his plane 180 degrees in the wrong direction. For nearly sixty years, until his death in December of 1995 at the age of 88, Corrigan forever insisted that he was surprised to see the Irish, instead of Californians, when he taxied his plane to a stop. But there's good reason to believe that Corrigan's famous flight was hardly a mistake.

Lindbergh's solo flight across the Atlantic occurred on May 21, 1927. Corrigan, fascinated by Lindbergh's feat, learned to fly. He paid \$310 for the monoplane, which his friends derided as a mere "crate." By 1938, still only ten pilots had matched Lindbergh's pioneer flight across the Atlantic. Corrigan longed to become one of the first dozen pilots to fly across the ocean. But he ran into a problem. The Department of Commerce inspected his plane and rejected his request for a Transcontinental flight. The airplane, they said, was unsafe. Didn't pass inspection. Low quality. Sloppy. Corrigan's dream of crossing the Atlantic - being postponed, he accepted the government's ruling and announced his intention to go home. Time to relax. Time to retool. Corrigan climbed into his crate. Took off for California. And landed in Ireland! He was straight-faced and twinkle-eyed in his insistence that Ireland was not his intended destination. But everyone suspected . . . No, everyone knew, Corrigan had gone the wrong way, on purpose. On July 17, 1938, Douglas Corrigan became an international celebrity.

Jesus often went the wrong way - on *purpose*. Our Gospel text today is an excellent example.

So much about this story seems--well, wrong. It seems out of place with what we know of Jesus' ministry, out of character with what we know of Jesus' spirit and attitude. The story just isn't right. To begin with, this is the only instance in the four gospels of Jesus traveling outside of Israel. Tyre and Sidon are situated on the coast of the Mediterranean, in Phoenician territory, populated by non-Jews. That's the wrong direction for one who defined his mission narrowly as

one "sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Then there's that curious dialogue around which this story is built. "Curious" is hardly descriptive enough. "Rude" would seem more appropriate. What are we to think about Jesus looking this woman in the eye and calling her, her family, her race--dogs? Are these words of Jesus sort of a messianic tirade, kept well-hidden until chapter fifteen? When she appeals for assistance, Jesus replied, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Jesus is telling this woman, "My compass is pointing in the direction of Israel, not of Phoenicia." That's also out of character for the Lord we have come to know.

But it gets worse. It gets downright nasty. When she is bold enough to add an addendum to her plea for help, Jesus brushes her off. "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs!" Ouch! Jesus would earn a bundle of demerits using that sort of insensitive, politically incorrect language. It just seems wrong.

Is Jesus really saying this woman and her daughter should be excluded as recipients of his mercy on the grounds of their nationality? That's not the Jesus we have come to know in the previous pages of this gospel. These words seem so uncaring, so hurtful. But we have *also* learned from these chapters, that Jesus knew the Pharisees and Scribes were always watching him - *waiting* for him to slip up. But in THIS story, I think you'll hear the Pharisees and Scribes applauding. What an unusual cheering section for Jesus. These guys were his regular antagonists and constant irritants. But not on *this* day. The boos and hisses turn into congratulations. "That's right, Jesus! Now you're talking! Tell that gentile dog of a woman to shoo away! She is a bad influence. Keep this talk up and we'll soon be passing a petition to allow you into our group."

The Pharisees and scribes taking *Jesus'* side? We read this passage and feel like we're in a different book than the New Testament we have known. Something is wrong. Seriously wrong. The normally steady compass of our understanding about Jesus is somehow malfunctioning, pointing 180 degrees in the opposite direction. There are several interpretations for why Jesus acted this way. But one I tend to accept makes more sense considering the Jesus *we* have come to know.

We only have the *written* word. We don't hear the inflections -or see the body language. Some scholars suggest Jesus said these things to the woman tongue-in-cheek, with a twinkle in his eye. Remember how Corrigan *insisted* that his mission was to California, even though he had landed in Ireland? Everyone knew that he had come the wrong way on purpose. I think Jesus did the same thing. Acting the wrong way on purpose! In other words, perhaps Jesus said, "Oops, I've come the wrong way," in the same sense Corrigan spoke identical words to the Irish. But the world suspected - no, the world knew. They knew with a single glance into Corrigan's excited eyes that he had fulfilled his purpose. He was right where he wanted to be. Could it be that Jesus had that same look in his eye? Could this woman have caught the same glimmer of playful hope in Jesus' eyes? "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 eye, my excitement will show you that this was my intention all along."

Evidently, she noticed *something*. Maybe Jesus' tone gave his real intention away, maybe his inflection, or his body-language. Maybe his outright smile. But through the rough exterior of these words, she sees the goodness of his true intent and responds, "Yes, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table. I will be happy with the crumbs." Now Jesus would most likely burst out with excitement. "Here is a great example of faith! Your daughter is healed."

At that point, this passage - which seemed so terribly wrong - now seems so wonderfully right! Taking the expansion of the gospel to all the nations, to all points of the compass. There is no point on the compass which, when we take the gospel in that direction, will be the wrong direction. If some consider it wrong to take the gospel to a people of a different race, or a different nationality, a different sexuality - a different political affiliation, or a different socio-economic grouping— then let us *intentionally* go the wrong way. On purpose! Sometimes we are called to go the wrong way on purpose. Sometimes Christians are called to go against the grain of popular opinion. Jesus did. He allowed his hungry disciples to prepare food on the Sabbath in contradiction to the accepted tradition of the Pharisees and scribes, placing *human* need above the demands of the law. On another occasion he healed a man on the Sabbath. A violation of rabbinical Sabbath laws. The scribes weren't happy about these deviations from the rules, any more than the government inspectors were happy about Corrigan's ignoring their decision. They played by the rules and would not be amused by Jesus coming into contact with a gentile woman. That is defiling. Low quality. Sloppy activity for a Jewish savior. But Jesus firmly stood his ground and showed us that acts of love, mercy and acceptance must be elevated above acts of properness and tradition. Jesus seemed to have a sense of when to violate tradition, when to head the wrong way - on purpose.

After all, Jesus is King of Kings! He should have been heading to the Throne. But he went the wrong way - on Purpose - to the Cross. He went the Wrong way - for US!

The Compass of Society may pull us in one direction. The Will of God will often pull us in the other. In order to remain steadfast in our faith there will be times when we have to go Wrong Way, at least as far as popular culture and society is concerned, to do the Right Thing for God. Sometimes it IS right - to do the Wrong Thing. Amen