

## “When A U-turn is Legal”

Date: February 18, 2015

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Mt.6:1-6,16-21

Occasion: Ash Wednesday

Theme: Repentance, Lent

One fine spring day a year or two ago, my son Chris came up to visit us. Chris has been my canoeing buddy since he was in grade school. We hadn't seen him in a few months, as he lives several hours south of us, now.

On this beautiful spring day, we were driving down Interstate 79 headed towards Greenville, where we were going to connect with a river outfitter to shuttle our canoe for us. We were planning to do a rather lengthy section of the Shenango River.

Well, we got to talking and before I knew what had happened, we were about 20 minutes past the exit where we needed to get off. We had a good laugh about it and then tried to find a place where we could turn around. It was going to be another 15 minutes before the next exit.

I had promised the outfitter that we would meet him at a certain time and I don't like to be late to my appointments, even if it is for recreation. Besides, the river was beckoning and I was anxious to be on the water. So, what did I do? I found one of those U-turns that are reserved for emergency vehicles.

It was early on a Saturday and traffic was light, and I reasoned that it was safe to turn around. After all, turning around was the only way to get to our correct destination.

Most of us realize that making illegal turns in the middle of a highway is not the wisest course of action. But, if you're going the

wrong way, you can only reach your destination if you're willing to turn around. Tonight, we'll learn when a U-turn is legal.

It's what the prophet Joel tells the people of Israel to do in our reading for this Ash Wednesday. "Return to the Lord, your God." He's using a word that's commonly found in the Old Testament to speak about *repentance*.

The word we translate as "Return" literally means to "turn around," or "come back." You belong to God, but you've been moving away from him, putting other things ahead of God. And the only way to get back to where you belong is to turn around.

Why turn around? Because we have wandered away from God. In some cases, we haven't just drifted off, but we have sped away from God as quickly as possible. And the prophetic word to us this Ash Wednesday is very simple: "Turn around. Return to the Lord your God." And why should we turn back?

Because God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." God does not drive us away. God relents from punishing. God doesn't demand payment for the damage we've done. God's word to us is simple: "Come back." Like the father in Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son, God is out by the side of the road waiting for our return.

Of course we can do that at any time of year. But the Christian tradition has picked the season of Lent as a time to give special emphasis to repentance and the call to take our Christian commitment more seriously. It is an appropriate time because Jesus'

journey to Jerusalem, to Good Friday and Easter, is the model and guide for our return to God. We are called to follow on the way to the cross.

Now, Jesus is the one human being who hasn't wandered away from God. He is God's beloved Son and did not sin, so in that sense he never would have needed to return to God. But like the Prodigal Son, Jesus went into the far country – not to escape from the Father, but to find his prodigal brothers and sisters.

He came in the likeness of sinful flesh, sharing our human condition to the fullest, in order to turn us around and bring us back to God.

Our Lenten journey, which begins today, is to be patterned after his journey. We are called to remember *what* has saved us and take with renewed seriousness the call to follow Christ and commit ourselves to him.

But how can we do that? If you're driving in the wrong direction along the highway, it's pretty simple – just make a 180 degree turn. But how do we return to God?

First, remember that it is God who is calling you to do this, and it is God who will enable you to do it. God doesn't just leave us on our own in the far country and demand that we find our way back home. Through various means, the Holy Spirit calls us and guides us home.

One of those means is being where you are right now, in church. Worship is where we hear the good news of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. The gospel is more than information. It is the power to save us, to redeem us, to turn us around in a new direction.

The Bible is another tool that God has given us to draw us back to Himself. But we must read it to get anything out of it. To assist you in the reading of the Word, we have made available daily devotions for Lent. They're available in the lobby outside the sanctuary. Each day has a suggested scripture passage, a short message and a brief prayer. I encourage you to take one for yourself or your family.

God has also given us community, the body of believers, to strengthen us in our walk with Christ. This Lent I will be leading a study group on Tuesday nights. You can pick up a workbook and a study book in the lobby before you go home tonight. The first session will be next Tuesday night. A donation is requested but not required.

Many of us are visual people, and visual reminders help to call us back to a life of prayer. This year we have made available book marks and key-chain prayer reminders that complement the study we're engaged in.

Prayer and fasting are time-honored spiritual disciplines that Christians have used to draw closer to God. In prayer, God often reveals the things that need to change in our lives, so that we can make that turn-around in our lives. Prayer is what develops intimacy in our relationship with God.

Fasting simply enhances the experience of prayer. The Bible tells us that we do not live by bread alone, but it's hard to live for very long without it. Going without it a little while, long enough to get hungry, can be a reminder to us of the ultimate source of our food and our lives, our Creator. Again, it is a way of staying close to God.

And that's the real point of Lent and of the whole Christian life. "Return to the Lord, your God," and stay there. Amen.