

WHEN “NO GO!” MEANS “NO, GO!”

Sermon, May 9, 2010

Texts: John 5:1-9, Acts 16:6-15

We read today in our lectionary Scripture readings of five people who changed direction in response to the directive leading of Jesus Christ. In our Gospel reading, we are told of a man who had been an invalid for some thirty-eight years. For a long, long time, he had gone nowhere. Suddenly, with clear direction from Jesus Christ, he gets up and he moves ... he is made whole and is on the move, showing it is never, never too late to respond to the direction of our Lord. Then in our reading from Acts, we read of Paul, Silas, Timothy, Luke and the woman who happens to be my daughter's namesake, Lydia (*Lydia was the first European convert; Lydia was also the name of my maternal grandmother-in-law. That Lydia's father, my mother-in-law's grandfather, was a German missionary who came to this country to minister among German immigrants in the Midwest.*). The reading begins with Paul and his companions on the move. They have come from the east, and they want to go south into Asia. We are told that for some reason, the Spirit of Jesus prevents them from going to Asia. They can't go south, so they begin to make plans to go north, to a region called Bithynia, which was up around the Black Sea. But again the Spirit said, *"No, you can't do that either."*

Please note: *The "No" didn't mean stop everything.* It didn't mean, *"Quit. Give up. Go home."* The "No" simply meant stop moving in that direction, and go in another! To be led by the Spirit of God means to keep moving. Don't quit! Don't give up. If you can't go south, well, go north. If you can't go north, go west. Go south to southwest if you have to. Even if every way seems blocked, keep faithful, keep moving, and keep making every effort to listen to the Spirit's leading. If you can't get the job or admitted to the school you want, apply for another. If a treatment doesn't work for your disease, try something else. Whatever it might be, you have to stay on the move. Don't bring your life to a full stop. Sometimes the only way we have clarity about God's will is that all other options are blocked. Like so many of us, Paul, Silas, Luke and Timothy might have been confused about where they were going. But they're very, very clear about where they are not going. They would not go where Jesus told them not to go. In like manner, there are just some places honorable people will not go; there are some things people of integrity do not do. We don't go to those places where the Spirit says "No," even if we don't know where we are going to go or what we are going to do. We don't always need to understand the "No". We don't even need to agree with it. But we do need to know the Spirit of God does lead ... even if His leading is by closing, and sometimes slamming, certain doors. Stay on the move ... you never know what can happen. It's never too late to change direction. .

"That does it. I can't go on this way. My direction will have to change." These thoughts ran through his head as he lay there like a snake in the grass, hiding. He had studied the little girl's habits. He knew she would come outside her grandparent's house mid-afternoon to play. And he hated himself for this; he hated himself for what he was planning to do. In his whole miserable, messed-up life he'd never considered anything so callous and desperate as kidnapping. Yet here he was, lying in the grass, hidden by trees from the house, waiting for an innocent, red-haired, two-year-old girl to come within reach.

Well, it was turning out to be a long wait. He had time to think and reflect about what he was doing. Time to think back about the many frustrating obstacles and detours in his life that led him to this desperate point. He was five when his father had died. At fourteen, and still in the sixth grade, he dropped out of school and hit the road, running away from an abusive stepfather. He tried odd jobs here and there and everywhere, and hated them all ... a farm hand, construction work, even a streetcar conductor. At sixteen he lied about his age and joined the Army ... and he hated that, too. When his enlistment was up he headed for Alabama, tried blacksmithing and failed at it. He then became a locomotive fireman with the Southern Railroad. He liked that, and they liked him, and he figured maybe he had finally found himself. At the time he was eighteen years old. At eighteen he got married, and within months, he and his wife were expecting their first child. Then the Southern Railroad cut him off. Harland had been fired again. He tried and tried to find gainful and steady employment. While working at a succession of very-short term railroad jobs, he tried studying law by correspondence. He tried running a ferryboat, tried running a gas station. Nothing worked. Harland began feeling the crippling and darkening despair of a man who was utterly bereft of hope.

Some of you have been there. Some of you are there right now.

Then, one day, while he was again jobless and out looking for work, his young wife gave away all their possessions, took their two-year-old daughter, and went home to her parents. And now here was Harland, hiding in the weeds outside a home in Roanoke, Virginia, plotting the kidnapping ... of his daughter. He'd watched the little girl's habits, knew about her afternoon playtime. But, for some fortunate reason this one day, she did not come out to play. Something snapped at that point. That did it. He couldn't go on this way.

Well, to make a long story short, his wife and daughter returned to him. They reconciled. Times continued to be tough, but they determined to make a go of it for their daughter's sake, and eventually had two more children. Years later he became chief cook at a restaurant in Corbin, Kentucky. The business was doing well until the new highway bypassed the restaurant. And by this time, he was in his sixties. He wasn't the first man nor will he be the last to arrive at the twilight of life with little or nothing to show for it. But he was proud he'd at least stayed honest. But the years had slid by ... a lifetime was all but gone and he and they had nothing. But he had not *really* felt old until that day the postman brought his first Social Security check. That day, something within him snapped. In his mind, the Government was feeling sorry for him. "*You've had it,*" the Government seemed to be saying, "*That's it. You can't take care of yourself, so we'll take care of you and yours. It's time to give up and retire.*" He said to himself, "*That does it. I can't go on this way.*" And his direction would change. He got so angry he took that Social Security check ... which was a whopping \$105 ... and started a new business. At the age of 65 Harland ... *Colonel Harland Sanders* ... started "Kentucky Fried Chicken." No, it is never too late to change direction.

Paul and his companions came from the east. They were prevented by God from moving south or north. Paul has this vision of a Macedonian saying, "Come West, Young Man." But even if he hadn't had this vision, it was the only direction left. Often that is the only way any of us have clarity about the will of God. All the other possibilities are blocked. This westward change of direction leads to a crucial turning point in the growth of the church. The narrative of Acts switches from "they" to "we" here. Troas, which may be better known to you as Troy, is where Luke joined up with Paul, Silas and Timothy. Together they sail on from Troy to Samothrace, to Neapolis, and on to the leading city and trade center of Philippi. There in Philippi was a Roman-built highway that went right into the heart of Western Europe. This highway caused this Roman colony to be a bridge, a bustling center of trade, between East and West. And it is here the Gospel goes westward into Europe, rather than south/east into Asia. It is here in Philippi they have an encounter with a faithful woman who is attending a worship service down by the riverside.

Lydia was "*... a dealer in purple cloth who was a worshipper of God ...*" (16:14) These eleven words tell us that Lydia was in all likelihood a highly intelligent, fiercely independent, influential, self-sufficient, clear-thinking and resourceful woman. She directed her own business, a rarity for a woman in that day. Her business was the import and distribution of purple, a costly color worn only by royalty and/or the well-to-do; her work undoubtedly gave her contact with influential, interesting and well-heeled clientele. She had to have a considerable amount of personal capital to deal in this trade. Her financial resources, business acumen and influential contacts put her in a position to eventually be of great help in establishing, leading and maintaining the Philippian church, which was the most influential and effective congregation of the first century. An important thing to note: Although she is a businesswoman in an area which seems to not recognize a Sabbath, this "worshipper of God" makes it a priority to be at a place of worship on that day anyway. She may be losing a competitive edge out in the market; after all, her competitors in the marketplace certainly had no scruples about the Sabbath. However, here was an astute businesswoman who knew there were matters of greater importance than business. She did not go to the marketplace, she went to a place of worship. She "*remembered the Sabbath Day, and kept it holy.*"

Because of her faithfulness at worship, she became the very first European convert to Christianity, and she became one of the most influential people to be used by God to bring the Church westward. We know from Paul's epistles the Philippian church was one of the most, if not the most, influential and effective of the early churches. Lydia was in a key position geographically, socially and financially to help facilitate the westward growth of the church. Who knows how much she may have influenced the very course of Western history by being faithful at work and worship? Think about this: the vast majority of us here this morning are of European descent. The ultimate reason for that is twofold: It is because (1) God said "No Go!" when Paul and his companions wanted to go south, north or east, saying "No, GO!" to the west, where one of the very first people they met was this influential, key, resourceful woman who faithfully attended worship. And the church grew westward up into the heart of Europe. (2) It is an historical fact that the movement to the Americas was largely sparked by *European* missionary zeal and by *European* Christians coming to the shores of this continent looking for a place to worship freely. I don't think it is too much of a stretch to say that because Lydia was faithful at worship, not only was the course of her life changed, but the literal course of Western civilization was changed! In fact, you are here because Lydia was there, faithful in her attendance at worship. Now, the course of Western civilization may not change because you chose to attend worship this day ... but then again, you never know!

It is in worship that we normally encounter the spirit of God, and it is in worship we listen for the directive voice of our Lord through His word and spirit where we are *not* to go ("No go!"), and where we are to go ("No, Go!"). Let us make every effort to be faithful at our worship, seeking to hear and heed the Spirit's direction.