7-7/8-18 Rev. Amy Haines

Acts 9:1-22 No U-Turn? Road Signs Series

While serving in Northwest Ohio, I would travel to Camp Widewater at least once a year, to assist with camp, to attend a retreat, or to take my own boys to camp there. For many of those years, I would approach the camp from the west—and invariably miss the turn into camp!

Nowadays it helps to have a “Camp Entrance” road sign to cue me that my turn is coming, but no such sign existed for many years. So I would pass the entrance, then travel a couple of miles down the road before making a U-turn.

U-turns are helpful when we find ourselves going in the wrong direction. What is not helpful, however, is when you find yourself in unfamiliar territory, suddenly realize you are going in the wrong direction or passed your destination, and you come upon our road sign for today: “No U-Turn Allowed.”

Earlier this year I was heading to Reynoldsburg and made a quick stop at a McDonalds at an unfamiliar exit. Trying to get out of McDonalds and back on the interstate was extremely confusing. One had to go right to go left, then take an overpass that led to a roundabout that then led to the exit. Only I missed all of that, and found myself in a right turn only lane that led me away from the interstate.

And then I was on a divided highway with no crossroads in sight, and you guessed it, “No U-Turn Allowed” signs down the median.

Confession time—no cops and no cars were around, so instead of traveling miles out of my way, when I was already running late, I made a U-Turn…under the no U-Turn sign. Anyone else want to confess to not paying attention to that important road sign?

U-turns mean that we are traveling in the wrong direction, even sometimes going down the wrong road. Yet before we ever decide to make a U-turn, we have to recognize we are going the wrong way.

I love playing Mario Kart with my kids, and at times there appears before me a big “U-turn” sign because I have spun out and find myself facing or even driving in the wrong direction.

O that life would be so obvious! Have you ever wished for a big neon “U-turn now” sign in your life— when your choices led you down the wrong road or consequences affected your life and the lives of loved ones around you? Sometimes we don’t realize we are on the wrong road until it is too late.

Then, when we have made mistakes, when we realize we are going in the wrong direction, how many times when we want to turn around do we suddenly encounter the “No U-turn Allowed” sign? We are swept up by consequences. We are no longer trusted. In order to turn around we have to heavily fight against the current of public opinion.

If you have faced one or both of those signs in life, know that you are not alone. Our human tendency is to hold on to grudges, mistakes, and fear rather than move forward in trust, forgiveness, and love. Our human tendency is to resist any sort of change, be it the bad or ugly or even the good or great. So we fight against allowing U-turns, or we aren’t honest enough with one another to be that “U-turn now” sign for each other.

Thankfully, God’s grace allows U-turns. God still loves us enough to not leave us where God finds us, but to move us ever forward, transforming us day by day. John Wesley would call that sanctifying grace. And the Bible is full of story after story of such redeeming grace and redeeming love. What better story to show us that God allows U-turns than the story of Saul and Ananias and the Christian community in Damascus.

Saul was a zealous Jew, a learned Pharisee who was the last person anyone would have ever expected to become a devout follower of Jesus. Saul persecuted people of The Way, believing followers of Jesus had turned away from the One True God.

In Jerusalem, Saul had approved of the stoning of Stephen, then had gone house to house to arrest any men and women who believed in Jesus. His persecution caused the early church to scatter to other towns and cities, including Damascus.

Today’s Scripture finds Saul on his way to Damascus, 150 miles from Jerusalem, with letters from the high priest allowing him to arrest and bring back with him any followers of Jesus he found there.

The faithful in Damascus knew it would only be a matter of time before Saul came their way,

and they feared his presence among them, knowing he came to challenge their faith, arrest them, and even possibly have them killed.

Yet God had other plans.

On the road to Damascus Saul is unexpectedly blinded by a light from heaven and hears a voice from heaven call to him and say, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

Saul, in fear and trembling responds, “Who are you, Lord?”

The voice replies, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.”

Saul is blinded and told to trust, trusting the voice of a Savior who five minutes ago he did not believe in, trusting that when he entered the city he would be told what to do next. At that moment Saul had no idea whether or not he would ever see again and had no idea whether or not God would persecute him like he persecuted the followers of Jesus.

Unlike many stories of transformation, when *we* recognize our own sin and seek to make a

U-turn, *God* initiated Saul’s transformation. Saul then had to choose how to respond. He could have denied that voice, and stayed blind forever, or he could choose to trust that voice and do what it said to do on the chance his sight would be redeemed.

Yet in order to trust, Saul had to change his entire perspective on God, faith, and his interpretation of the Scriptures. Saul was such a literalist that his faith left no room to even consider Jesus as the long awaited Messiah. His view of God was based in law not love.

So God challenged Saul to change his heart, his faith and his direction for living. God called Saul to make a dramatic U-turn, from persecutor to pastor.

And God gave Saul three days, lost in total darkness, fasting from all food and drink, to prayerfully consider such a turnaround.

Saul was not the last to experience such a God-directed U-turn.

…In the early 13th century Giovanni was the son of a wealthy merchant who enjoyed the indulgences of wealth. As he grew he sought adventure and joined the military. He was even captured and held in prison for a year. Eventually Giovanni made a pilgrimage to Rome as his need for God awakened within him. While in Rome he had a vision of Christ that turned him to the Lord. He forsook his wealth and took a vow of poverty. He devoted his life to caring for the needy. Giovanni became known as St Francis, a man changed by God.

In the early 1900s …Jack faced a number of tragedies in his young life, including the death of his mother. By the age of 15 Jack committed himself to being an atheist and turned his interest to mythology and the occult. Later in life God placed Christian friends in Jack’s life who led him to faith in God and then in Jesus. This faith did not come lightly as Jack as a man of reason used his intellect to resist. Eventually Jack became not only a believer but also a great Christian author, writing books defending and explaining Christian theology. Jack is better known as CS Lewis, the author of the Chronicles of Narnia. Through the influence of Christian friends Jack was a man changed by God.

 --adapted from Alex Stevenson “The Paul Paradigm” pastoralex.fortunecity.com

At this year’s annual conference our first Fearless talk was on addiction, given by Pastor Chris and Tammy Reese from New City Church in Dayton. They shared their personal stories of being recovering addicts who used to fear that no one would love them. Especially the church.

They both gave thanks for pastors who truly accepted them as they are, and reminded them of God’s forgiving love, and encouraged their U-turns toward recovery. Now they do the same for others, truly welcoming all who dare to enter the doors of New City Church—the addict, the homeless, the single mother, the professional, the widow, the recovering citizen.

A warm welcome is not always what many receive. Dramatic U-turns are often met with mixed reactions. Chris and Tammy have experienced different reactions over the years, from judgment to grace. How do we respond to those who join us who are seeking to turn their lives around?

When Saul showed up blind in Damascus with a story of encountering the risen Christ, he was met with a mixed response. Some trusted his story. Others remained fearful in his presence. Some were amazed that God would choose him, of all people, for such transformation. Others were concerned this was his trick to find out everyone to arrest.

Saul is not the only U-turn in our story today. Ananias was a faithful follower of Jesus living in Damascus. Not much is known about him except that he was obedient to God.

The Lord called to Ananias in a vision and Ananias answered, “Here I am, Lord.”

Then the Lord said to him, “Get up and go to the street called Straight and in the house of Judas find a man from Tarsus named Saul. Saul has seen you in a vision. Go, lay hands on Saul and restore his vision as a symbol of his new life in Christ.”

Ananias was shocked and replied, “Lord, are you crazy? I have heard much about this man, and none of it good for your people. He has persecuted the saints in Jerusalem. He has the authority to arrest any and all of us who speak your name. This man is only trouble. Are you sure you have the right man?”

As shocking as God’s call was to Saul, the call to Ananias was no less difficult. Both were invited to change the direction of their thoughts or actions.

God has a way of asking his followers to do difficult things.

Noah- build me an ark, no matter what the neighbors think

Abraham- you’ve waited so long for your blessed son, now offer him to me as a sacrifice

Mary- I know you’re not yet married, but birth the Son of God

Ananias- go and welcome Saul, the same Saul who once was your enemy and now will be your friend

What difficult things does the Lord ask of us today? My beloved sons and daughters-

Teach my children. If you won’t, who will?

Watch your language. It reflects what you believe.

Feed the hungry. They are also my children.

Love your neighbor. Even those you disagree with.

Be my church in this world. Follow my way, not your own pleasures.

Everyone in Damascus, including Ananias, had heard of Saul. Some had already fled his wrath once. Some were considering fleeing again. So not only Saul, not only Ananias, but also the Christian community at Damascus experienced a God-driven U-turn. I can imagine, though, how they yearned to put up a “No U-turn allowed” sign at the city gate.

Yet when Ananias questioned the Lord, the Lord told him, “Go, for Saul is my chosen instrument to bring salvation to the Gentiles and the Jews. He will suffer for my name, but I will show him the way.”

Despite his misgivings, his doubts and his struggles with Saul, Ananias listened to the Lord, stepped out in faith, and trusted that God’s promise was greater than Saul’s terrorism. Ananias went to Saul and laid hands on him. Saul regained his sight, was baptized, learned from the Damascus disciples, and became a new man as a believer in Jesus Christ. Not only was Ananias challenged to welcome “Brother Saul” but also the Damascus Christian community. If God had not intervened Saul would have been persecuting and arresting them. Now he was breaking bread and learning from them what it meant to be a follower of Christ.

How often are we hesitant of welcoming those transformed by grace? How often do we yearn to put up no U–turn signs as men and women change before our very eyes, upsetting our expectations, going beyond our assumptions, maturing, redeemed?

Pastor Mike Slaughter, Pastor Emeritus at Ginghamsburg UMC, once shared his personal struggle of being a transformed Saul in his hometown, when few saw him through the eyes of God.

He shared,

...One of the biggest problems in my hometown after I became a Christian was that everyone knew what a hellion I was and no one believed it. So, I started this youth movement, a teen club in my own hometown. Everyone was telling their little brothers and sisters that Mike Slaughter is a phony man. "We used to hang out with him. We were at the parties - we saw what went on. He's a phony." I changed. Jesus makes all things new.

My high school principal, who paddled my behind on two occasions, wanted me to do a high school assembly. To share how Jesus had changed my life. At the end of it I even gave the prayer so anyone in the assembly at North College Hill High School could accept Jesus.

The German teacher wouldn't come into the assembly because I had torn up her language lab two years before and she didn't believe I could change. But Jesus makes all things new.

 --Michael Slaughter, 6-8-02, ginghamsburg.org

God had a purpose for Saul’s U-turn. Saul would forever be known as Paul and become God’s personal ambassador to Jews and Gentiles and even kings.

And God has a purpose for our U-turns, even if they aren’t evident in the moment. Those whom God calls, God equips. Those whom God equips, God empowers.

We each have a story to tell of Jesus’ presence in and call upon our lives. Some of us may have a dramatic story of redemption, while others may have a gradual story of growing in faith and faithfulness. Trust that your story is your story, and God can and will speak through your story to reach out to others.

We, too, are called to trust. We, too, are called to faithfulness. We, too, are called to put down our no U-turn signs and welcome those seeking to follow Jesus and change their lives. If we live by faith, then we, too, like Saul and Ananias and the Damascus community, will be converted and transformed.

But if the only road signs we are going to show to the world are “No U-turns allowed”; or “stop”: you are not welcome here; or “one way”: my way or the highway, then we may as well give up and go home. The world needs us to allow for U-turns, live by grace, and be faithful to our call to be the church, a community of believers living out the kingdom of God in this world.

As Christians we believe in a God of resurrection! A God of second chances! A God who allows U-turns in order to find new life in Christ!

Do we live out what we believe? Are we open to God’s U-turns of transforming love and grace in our lives, and in the lives of those around us?

As we come to the table of Holy Communion, a holy mystery of God’s grace for all, may we renew our commitment today to living for Jesus, open to U-turns, open to transformation, open to grace.

May it be so. Let us pray.