

!yaW gnorW

(On Purpose)

Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting,

“Have mercy on me, Son of David . . .”

He answered, “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 15:22, 24, 26)

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, **July 15, 2018**

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Tuesday will mark the 80th anniversary of a significant moment in aviation history. In the early morning hours of July 17, 1938, thirty-one year old Douglas Corrigan topped off the fuel tank of his 1929 Curtis Robin monoplane and, moments later, he was airborne from Floyd Bennett Airfield in Brooklyn, New York. The plane was hardly state-of-the-art, the cabin door tied shut with baling wire. His navigational instruments comprised of two compasses to direct him westward across the interior of the United States to the west coast, Long Beach, California.

Something, however, went wrong. Seriously wrong. Twenty-eight hours and thirteen minutes later, Corrigan landed near Dublin, in Ireland, having traveled 3,150 miles east. Remarkably, Corrigan had crossed the Atlantic Ocean, earning the young aviator the title that stayed with him throughout his life, “*Wrong Way*” *Corrigan*.

How can such a blatant navigational blunder be explained? Corrigan claimed one compass did not work at all and that the other malfunctioned so that, disoriented by ascending into a cloud bank at takeoff, he pointed the aircraft 180 degrees in the wrong direction. For nearly sixty years, until his death in 1995 at the age of eighty-eight, Corrigan insisted he was surprised to see the Irish instead of Californians when he taxied his plane to a stop. “*I’m Douglas Corrigan,*” he said to the startled Irish airport workers, “*Just got in from New York. Where am I?*”

As you may have guessed, there’s good reason to believe Corrigan’s famous flight was anything but a blunder. Charles Lindberg’s solo flight across the Atlantic had occurred eleven years earlier, on May 21, 1927. Still, by 1938, only ten pilots had matched Lindberg’s pioneer flight. Corrigan, who had learned to fly after being inspired by Lindberg, longed to be in that first dozen. He paid \$310 for the monoplane in New York, which his friends derided as a “crate,” a rickety plane so precariously patched together that it was dubbed a flying jalopy. After purchasing the craft he flew to California to test it and outfit it, telling reporters that he nursed the plane “*from pasture to pasture*” all the way to California, where he took out the 90 horsepower engine and replaced it with a 165 horsepower model, also installing five extra fuel tanks nearly blocking his forward view.

When he returned to New York he ran into a problem when the Department of Commerce rejected his request for a transcontinental flight plan. The airplane, they said, was unsafe. Didn't pass inspection. Low quality. Slipshod. "Mr. Corrigan, you would be too vulnerable. You'd be setting yourself up for tragedy. Request denied."

His dream of crossing the Atlantic postponed, Corrigan accepted the government's ruling and announced his intention to go home to California. Time to relax, rethink, retool. The government was probably right, to say the least. After all, it had taken him nine days to fly from California to New York, making numerous stops due to weather and mechanical problems. One of those stops, by the way, was in our own Arkadelphia, Arkansas where in 1938, he told a reporter years later, no one landed on purpose! Nine days to cross the continent? What, then, would he do over the Atlantic, where it's all or nothing?

So on July 17, 1938 Corrigan climbed into his flying jalopy to head home, stocking himself with only a few chocolate bars, two boxes of Fig Newtons and a quart of water. He took off for California just after 5:00 a.m. and landed the next day in Ireland, straight-faced and twinkle-eyed in his insistence that Ireland was not his intended destination.

Ah, but everyone suspected -- well, let's be honest -- everyone knew that he had come the *Wrong Way, On Purpose*. So it was that Douglas Corrigan achieved international celebrity, his name forever a part of aviation history, a hero of adventure and daring. He may have flown the wrong way but, if so, he had flown the *Wrong Way On Purpose*, straight into the hearts of the people.

Flying license suspended, he had to sail, not fly, back to New York, arriving on August 4 to a tumultuous greeting. On the next day New Yorkers lined lower Broadway for a ticker-tape parade eclipsing that given to Lindbergh after his 1927 flight to Paris. Corrigan was an immediate sensation, pushing the sorry economic news of the Depression off the front page of newspapers and dominating broadcasts around the world.

Here's the cover of *The New York Post* on Friday, August 5, 1938. I love the creativity of the *Post's* covers, checking them at home every morning with my paper and coffee I call up the *Post* online to check out the cover. This edition is a classic, to be sure, and my inspiration for printing my title backwards in the bulletin, as did the *Post* on August 5th, 1938 -- *Hail to Wrong Way Corrigan!*



Jesus often went the *Wrong Way On Purpose*, our text from Matthew being an excellent example. So much about this story seems wrong, out of place with what we know of Jesus' ministry. The story just isn't right. The chapter begins with a reference to Jerusalem and ends in the Galilee, but in between that north/south axis the story veers westward into Phoenician territory on the coast of the Mediterranean. It's the only instance in the gospels of Jesus during his ministry traveling outside Israel, Tyre and Sidon situated in Phoenician territory and populated by non-Jews. That's clearly the wrong direction for one who, in response to a woman's plea for help, self-defined his mission as one "*sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*" Jesus is saying, "*My compass is pointing in the direction of Israel. I must have entered a cloud bank.. I mean to be east of here, in the Galilee, where my fellow Jews live.*"

It gets worse. When the woman is bold enough to add an addendum to her plea for help, Jesus brushes her off with a saying which has become well-known precisely for the same reason Corrigan's flight is recalled, it seems to be headed the Wrong Way. "*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. Were he to have said that on the floor of a United Methodist Conference it would be met with cringes throughout and certain censure.

It just seems wrong, not the Jesus we've come to know. These words are so uncaring, hurtful, spoken with a heart closed to the predicament of others, an "Us" and "Them" mentality injurious to the health and well-being of the human family. Does that sound like Jesus?

I love this 1784 painting of Jesus and the Canaanite woman by Jean-Germain Douais, now in the Louvre. The woman is on her knee appealing to Jesus, whose gesture and expression reveal a

certain distance, a coldness in his reaction to her appeal. Notice his hand acting as a shield. Not palm up, as an invitation, but down as a rejection of her appeal. He slightly leans away from defiling contact with this Gentile woman. There's a stiffness about him, his left arm crooked in posture of maintaining proper distance and adhering to law and tradition.



It's Wrong Way Jesus, if you ask me! And yet, do you perceive, as this woman must have, a slight leaning toward her as well? Despite his posture suggesting otherwise, she found an opening to his heart?

Listen closely and you'll hear the Pharisees applauding. What an unusual cheering section for Jesus. One can imagine their spoken approval, *"That's right, Jesus! Tell that dog of a woman to shoo! She is a defiling influence. Slipshod. Keep this talk up and we'll pass a petition to allow you back into favored status within our group."*

We read this passage and feel like we're in a different book than the New Testament we've known. Something has gone wrong. Seriously wrong. The normally steady compass of our gospel understanding is somehow malfunctioning, pointing him 180 degrees in the opposite direction of our expectations. So wrong is this passage seems that numerous interpretive rain dances have been attempted to explain it away. A few textual scholars have suggested, for example, that it's not genuine, a fabrication of the early church somehow entering the stream of textual transmission. Others see it merely as evidence of Jesus' human nature, that he was tired, resulting in uncharacteristic rudeness.

May I offer another solution? What if Jesus said these things to the woman tongue-in-cheek, a twinkle in his eye? Remember how Corrigan insisted that his mission was to California, even though he had landed in Ireland. He knew that everyone knew he had come the *Wrong Way On Purpose*. Might Jesus have done the same? Could she not have known, in a single glance, that despite Jesus' assertion that he had come the *Wrong Way*, his higher intent was to be none other than where he was?

Did a twinkle in his eye betray his higher purpose, and might this woman have caught this glimmer of playful hope? *"I'm sorry, madam, but 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, perhaps my excitement will betray that this was my intent all along. If I've come the Wrong Way, know that I have come the Wrong Way, On Purpose."*

Somehow, she noticed an open door. Perhaps Jesus' tone gave his intention away, his inflection, his body-language. These are things we can't see in a mere reading of ink on paper. Yet, through the rough exterior of these words she recognizes his true intent and responds, *"Yes, but even the dogs eat the crumbs of such goodness. I will be happy with the crumbs."*

With that Jesus bursts out with exuberance. *"Here is a grand example of faith. Your daughter is healed."* At that point, this passage which seemed so terribly wrong now seems wonderfully right, foreshadowing the expansion of the gospel to all points of the compass, so that there is no direction which could ever be the wrong direction, whether to those of a different race, a different nationality, or a different socio-economic grouping.

Sometimes, as Christian persons, are we not called to go the *Wrong Way On Purpose*, against the grain of accepted practice? Jesus did. For example, he allowed his hungry disciples to prepare food on the Sabbath in contradiction to the teaching of the Pharisees, thus elevating human need

above rabbinical law. He healed a man's shriveled hand on the Sabbath, another violation of strict rabbinical Sabbath laws. To be sure, the scribes weren't happy about these deviations from the rules, as government inspectors weren't happy about Corrigan's ignoring their decision. The scribes prided themselves on playing by the rules and would not be amused by Jesus coming into contact with a Gentile woman – defiling, low quality, slipshod activity for a Jewish teacher. Jesus firmly stood his ground that acts of love, mercy, and acceptance must be elevated above acts of strict obedience to tradition.

Now, for a final story I want to shift my analogy from aviation to golf. I think it's safe to say we have some golfers amongst us today, so listen up – this may help you when you tee off later today. I pointed out that Matthew 15 takes us from Jerusalem to the Galilee – south to north. Think of that as the fairway. With our passage Jesus hooks his shot into the rough, westward toward the Mediterranean pond. Can't you hear the disciples saying, *"This is not good. Let's get back to the fairway, back on course toward the Galilee."*

During the 1993 NCAA Women's Championship in Athens, Georgia. University of Kansas golfer Holly Reynolds hooked her tee shot on the 13th into the edge of a pond. Attempting to play her ball out of water, her swing struck an unsuspecting fish. Fish and ball splashed skyward, landing next to each other on the bank. That's when Holly's compassionate instinct took over. She picked the fish up and tossed it back into the water. Her opponents, however, were watching, ready to accuse her. *"Foul!"* they cried. *"You're breaking the rules. You're not allowed to touch that fish. You must play your ball where it lies, fish and all!"* And, true enough, USGA rule 13-4 says it's illegal to *"touch or move a loose impediment lying in or touching"* a hazard.

Kendra Graham, the USGA's Director of Women's Competition, was the highest ranking official on the course that day. When she arrived at the scene at the 13th hole, Kendra had but one question. *"Was the fish dead?"*

"No," Holly assured her. *"The fish was flopping."* Nobody disputed Holly's statement.

"No penalty!" declared Mrs. Graham, with all the authority of the USGA behind her. Since the fish was alive, she explained, it was not a *"loose impediment"* but an *"outside agency."* With everybody convinced the rules had been appropriately applied, all was right in the world of golf.

This Canaanite woman was a loose impediment to the disciples and the Pharisees. To Jesus, she was an outside agency. As such, compassion would be his highest rule.

May God give us grace to discern when we, too, are being called to go the:

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