

Roads Gone Wild!

*“Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor,
the crippled, the blind, and the lame . . .
Go out into roads and lanes, and compel the people to come in,
so that my house may be filled.
(Luke 14:21b, 23)*

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, **July 22, 2018**
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Last Sunday those who were here will remember that I took you in my opening illustration to an historical aviation anniversary, Tuesday being the 80th anniversary of Douglas Corrigan’s Wrong Way flight (July 17, 1938), taking off from New York for California, but instead landing in Dublin, Ireland, thus earning forever the nickname “*Wrong Way Corrigan*.” Of course, everyone knew he had gone the *Wrong Way On Purpose* (last week’s title), fulfilling his dream of becoming only the 11th pilot after Lindberg to cross the Atlantic.

We saw how Jesus often went the *Wrong Way On Purpose*, in Matthew 15 healing the daughter of the Canaanite woman, a Gentile. That’s the wrong way for a savior “*sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel*,” as he told her, adding, “*it’s not right to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs*.” Still, though his announced flight plan was to Israel, he landed squarely in Gentile territory, healing her daughter. If Jesus went the *Wrong Way*, he did so *On Purpose*.

Jesus’ parable in Luke 14 is yet another *Wrong Way On Purpose* story. His parable tells the story of a master inviting guests to a banquet, and when the invited guests offer excuses for why they can’t come, the master tells his servant to go out into the streets and the lanes to those not at first invited – the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame. “*Compel them to come in, so that my house may be filled*.” This master went the *Wrong Way On Purpose*.

If last Sunday I began with an aviation anniversary, today we remember an automotive anniversary. Tomorrow, July 23, is a significant date for Ford Motor Company, the 115th anniversary of the sale of the first Ford, a Model A sold on July 23, 1903 to Chicago dentist, Ernest Pfennig for \$850. Incorporated earlier that year, 1903,



Ford had 12 investors and 1000 shares. The original \$28,000 investment had dwindled down to \$223.65 when first car was sold. Things were about to change for Ford. By October 1, to begin the last quarter of their first year, they showed a profit of \$37,000.

Not just Ford, but the world was about to change. Streets and lanes which throughout human history had moved people with the same technology – pedestrian or animal borne – were about to go wild. It's not what the people expected, or even knew to desire. In fact, Henry Ford said, "*If I had asked people what they wanted, they would have said faster horses.*" What he gave them instead was *Roads Gone Wild*.

Sherry and I had a *Roads Gone Wild* experience in Paris last month. At the conclusion of leading our group on the Seine River cruise to Normandy, most of our group stayed an extra two nights in Paris. Our hotel was on Rue Marceau, less than a block off the bottom right hand corner of the image

you see here, the avenues radiating outward from the Arch of Triumph, one of the most significant landmarks of Paris. (It is here, by the way, that next Sunday the Tour de France will conclude, crowing the champion). It was quite a treat,



indeed, and a *Roads Gone Wild* experience as we walked to the roundabout circling the arch, a traffic circle wide enough for 8 or 9 lanes funneling all 12 avenues into a circle, 12 roads extending like spokes of a wheel from its hub. In fact, the French name for the arch (l'etoile) means star, these twelve avenues radiating outward like light beams from a star.

Crossing so many lanes of traffic as a pedestrian on the pavement is not advised, though I saw a few do it, wondering why they didn't cross through the underground tunnels, thus avoiding a perilous Dance of the Pavement at this *Roads Gone Wild* monument in Paris. Yes, the world has change a lot since that first Model A began to putter down the streets and lanes of Chicago.

A few years ago the Arkansas Highway Department tested a new way to merge traffic along the I-40 construction zone near Russellville, a technique called the *Zipper*. I thought of the Zipper as I saw cars and busses merging from those 12 avenues to begin pirouetting around the Arch.

Before new techniques of traffic merging, there I am driving along I-40 toward Fayetteville on a wonderful Friday, thinking of tomorrow's Game Day and the Razorback thrill that awaits. It's a wonderful drive, until . . . suddenly, the traffic slows to a crawl in both lanes. Clearly one of the lanes ahead is closed. But, which lane? Could be the right lane. Might be the left. That leaves

me wondering which way to merge in order to make the best time through the snag. As we crawl down the interstate highway I wish I had invested in orange barrels! Finally a sign alerts that the left lane is closed ahead. I and other patient, courteous drivers begin the tedious process of merging into the right lane.

That's when stress begins to mount as I watch with frustration as "*They*" zip by. You know who "*They*" are, those despicable last-second mergers. By the time I reach the closure I am fed up with those passing in the other lane, inconsiderate last-second mergers who've paraded by to squeeze in at the last moment. I want to punish them by filling in the gap between my vehicle and the car ahead, so getting right up on the bumper of the car in front, my eyes say to those trying to merge late, "*Don't even think about it!*" (Ironically, this act of retribution, as good as it might feel, snags traffic and actually amplifies the effects of the traffic jam. At least, that's what Sherry told me, she being a last second merger type).

Surely there is a better way and, guess what? Arkansas was first state in the nation to try a better way in 1999, the *Always Merge Left* idea known as the *Weave*, eliminating wondering which lane is closed by having motorists, at a distance from the approaching construction, always merge left. Then, even if construction has closed that lane, they weave back as a single line of traffic into the right lane. It's a simple rule: *Always Merge Left*.

In the *For What It's Worth Department*, I discovered yesterday that some merging traffic rules might be helpful at the Village Wal Mart on Saturday afternoon when half the Village is there. I hit a snag in the pickle aisle, a lady clogging up both lanes by parking her cart in one lane and standing in the other to study which pickles she wanted. I waited patiently of course, Rev. Goodpastor keeping peace in the pickle aisle, but when a man began to dart around me my eyes said, "*Don't even think about it!*" Well, that's another sermon for another day.

That new merging traffic technique I mentioned in Russellville, even newer than the *Weave*, is called the *Zipper*, inviting drivers to utilize both lanes until almost the point of closure, just as you might when leaving a parking lot after a football game or concert. As traffic begins to slow for construction, signs say, "*Use Both Lanes to Merge Point.*" Then, at the closure, another sign offers but two rules: "*Merge Now. Take Turns.*" This creates a *Zipper* effect, the success of which depends on drivers perceiving the pattern and being courteous toward one another.

Ah, the *Dance of the Pavement*, no longer the *Arkansas Weave* (always leading to the left) but now the *Russellville Zipper* (an elegant mix of left and right, not unlike the *Twist*). I feel a dance coming on! Can you hear the music, even in the midst of traffic noise on *Roads Gone Wild*?

I take my title today from an article in the December 2004 edition of *WIRED*, *Roads Gone Wild*, featuring the work of a traffic engineer from Holland named Hans Monderman. Mr. Monderman was recognized by *WIRED* and *The New York Times* as a new breed of traffic engineer whose inner city urban road designs were intentionally counter-intuitive (there's my *Wrong Way On Purpose* connection, don't miss it). He sought in congested inner city intersections to create a pattern like the *Zipper*, a *Dance of the Pavement* he describes as *Shared Space*.

How shall we share space so that *Roads Gone Wild* is a dance and not a collision? It's a great question for the human family, and also for churches such as ours with multiple venues of worship and many different space needs for groups. How do we Share Space along the crowded pathways of our living?

Monderman specialized in high accident inner city intersections with congested traffic flow complicated by cyclists and pedestrians. His philosophy sees an abundance of posted traffic signs as counter-productive and dangerous. Too many rules! He believed traffic at such intersections flows better without any signs, that signs and regulations amount to an admission of engineering failure. "*The trouble with traffic engineers,*" he says, "*is that when there's a problem with the road, they always try to add something. To my mind, it's much better to remove things.*" *Wrong Way on Purpose!*

Imagine a large city with a problem intersection, one with a history of serious accidents. Does the City Council create more laws, add more signs? Or, do they remove signs, leaving motorists to think for themselves? That sounds like church and faith to me! It even sounds like Old and New Testament! More rules and regulations? Or, teach principles and allow people to follow the spirit of the law rather than the letter of the law?

WIRED described Monderman as "*equal parts urban designer, social scientist, civil engineer, and psychologist.*" I would add, a Poet of the Pavement, and might even call him the Hard Hat Theologian. His counter-intuitive approach was that when we create intersections that seem dangerous they will, in fact, be safer. City planners have traditionally faced such intersections by asking, "*What new laws might we establish, what new signs to alert motorists to potential dangers and keep them safe?*" Monderman's solution? "*Build the intersection right, and you won't need signs or even lane markings. The public will figure it out.*" In other words, the only sign one needs is invisible with a single word, "*Think!*"

The most prominent manifestation of this philosophy has by now become ubiquitous – *Roundabouts*. At many of the world's busiest intersections, sign-less *Roundabouts* where every vehicle merges right until you circle to the outlet you desire, have become more common. Are you approaching an intersection wanting to turn left? In a roundabout you must first turn right and go around to your exit, always exiting to the right. (Again in the For What It's Worth Department, did you notice that our first hymn was based on this? We sang, "*We've a story to tell to the nations, that shall turn their hearts to the right . . .*").

The advantages are many: reducing speeds often without coming to a full stop, so saving energy by reducing engine idling and revving; minimizing T-bone and head-on type crashes at squared intersections, thus reducing injury; and since traffic always enters new thoroughfares by turning right, the pedestrian simplifies their visual environment of approaching danger.

Tom McNichol, who wrote that 2004 article in WIRED, tells of interviewing Monderman in Holland and going with him to witness a busy inner city intersection which he designed. "*It's remarkable for what it doesn't contain, signs or traffic signals to tell drivers how fast to go, what lane to get in, who has the right of way. There are no lane markers or even curbs to separate the road from sidewalk cafes. To an approaching driver, the intersection is utterly ambiguous . . .*

and that's the point . . . Somehow it all works. The drivers slow to gauge the intention of crossing cyclists or pedestrians. Negotiations over right of way are made through eye contact. Remarkably, traffic moves smoothly around the circle with hardly a brake screeching, horn honking, or obscene gestures . . . pedestrians and cyclists used to avoid this place as dangerous, but now, as you see, the cars look out for the cyclists, the cyclists look out for the pedestrians, and everyone looks out for each other."

That sounds so theological that I wonder, might a *Roads Gone Wild* type of social engineering teach us something about human interaction in our shared spaces, at the crossing points of humanity where the potential for chaos is high? Monderman called it "*psychological traffic calming*." Without signs, people realize they are being directed to "*Think!*" The road may look more dangerous, but it's a *Wrong Way On Purpose* phenomenon actually proven to be safer, rendering drivers less territorial, guided more by the logic and patience than by a selfish "*This-is-my-lane-and-what-the-heck-are-you-doing-here?*" mentality.

That, said *The New York Times*, is how Monderman turned urban transportation planning upside down -- the simple concept of "*Shared Space*." The results have been shown not only to reduce major accidents, but also can have economic benefits. At a Monderman-inspired project in West Palm Beach, Florida, the city declared: "*We've redesigned several major streets . . . bringing people and cars into much closer contact. The result: slower traffic, fewer accidents, (but) shorter (overall) trip times. People felt it was safe to walk there. The increase in pedestrian traffic attracted new shops and apartment buildings, so that property values along . . . one of the town's main drags, have more than doubled since it was reconfigured.*"

Monderman wrote, and listen for the theology in this, "*Every road tells a story. (But) so many of our roads tell the wrong story . . . A road with a lot of signs is saying, 'This is your space. We have organized your behavior so that as long as you behave this way, nothing can happen to you.' That is the wrong story. Who has the right of way? I don't care. People here have to find their own way, negotiate for themselves, use their own brains. When you treat people like idiots, they'll behave like idiots. It's a giant concrete mixing bowl, yet somehow it all works.*"

Ah, the Dance of the Pavement, using Shared Space safely and courteously. I'm wondering about the Dance of the Pew in a day when United Methodism is struggling with a rapidly changing culture seeking to pull it away from solid traditional views held for millennia. Some are in the fast lane wanting to merge culture and church. Others are in the slow lane resisting such change. Yet others want to just be pedestrian spectators to the Dance of the Pew. Might Shared Space philosophy offer a way to reduce head-on collisions of theology? I don't know, nor do I even know if I am hopeful. I am, though, prayerful.

To be sure, the streets and lanes of Luke 14 didn't need worry about inner city congestion. There was no need of roundabouts. Still, Jesus wanted them to understand the *Zipper* of merging traffic, the Shared Space of Jew with Gentile, the haves and the have nots, the young and the old, the blind and the seeing, the well and the ill.

I suppose one could describe the worship gathering of any church as a Roundabout. Christ of the Hills is today, right now, the central island of that *Roads Gone Wild* roundabout, our people

having gathering from many various “lanes” of life. Every road tells a story, Monderman said. And we need your story in this place! But we don’t stay here in worship, any more than a car would continue circling in a roundabout. We gather here in order to find avenues of exit to go outward in mission and ministry to our community and our world. We don’t all take the same exit, but rather our gifts and passions take us to different places as Christ’s disciples.

In the ancient Roman Empire, the place where three roads came together was called a *trivium*, which is where we derive the word, *Trivial*. Why? Because people shared conversation in the Shared Spaces of those intersections.

We come together into this shared space, this roundabout of worship, from so many avenues of life. I love to see the trivial conversations in the hallways as I arrive to begin worship. It may be conversation about family, about golf, about the news – Trivial, right?

Wrong. These trivial conversations at the crossing points of our living are anything but trivial. They forge human connections which teach us to love and respect one another, even in disagreement.

So let us go into the streets and the lanes and compel them to come in, so that God’s house may be full!