

"Bum Wheels, Slipped Belts, and Great Danes"

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

Luke 13:1-9, 31-35

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Second Sunday in Lent

Pastors have weird schedules. Since we put in a full day of work on Sunday, if we're smart, we'll take another day off during the week. It took me a long while here at Edgewood to figure out how to do that. Fridays have Men's Bible Study. Thursday seem to be Presbyterians' favorite day to have meetings. Wednesday is not an option, especially in the South. Many pastors take Monday, but I found that if I tried to relax on Monday, I just kept thinking about all the things that were piling up on my desk and in my email. So over this past year I've been taking Tuesday off. I put in a long day Monday to clear the docket, and I find I'm able to relax a bit on Tuesday. Of course, the upcoming Sunday's sermon is always floating in my brain as I do yard work, or clean the house, or go grocery shopping

This week I found myself pulling into the Publix parking lot, pondering how to talk about repentance on the Second Sunday in Lent. I wanted to get across the idea that as we seek to follow Jesus on this difficult path to the cross and beyond, he sees us veering off the trail. And he gets frustrated. And he gets angry. And he laments.

As I grabbed my grocery cart — sorry, “buggy” — and headed toward the bakery section, I had some really good thoughts running through my head, but I couldn't come up with an illustration. You know, one of those everyday examples that cuts through the confusing theology with a relatable image or experience. Ideas would pop into my head - but not fully formed. The scent of an idea. The shadow of an illustration. I was stuck.

And then I nearly crashed into the “Buy One Get One” Oreo display. The dang buggy had a bum wheel! Now, normally when this happens, I see it as a sign, as the buggy steers me in the general direction of the celery. *Real subtle, God.* But this was toward the c-r-e-m-e filled cookies! I pulled back and shimmed the metal cage back and forth, hoping to cast the demon out of it. But that front left wheel was a mess. I tried to go forward to get a loaf of bread, but it started veering off toward the cheese. My grandfather would have said I looked like I was walking a Great Dane. He would've pointed and shouted “Marmaduke!”

I got frustrated. I got angry. And just when I started to lament, I got that the joke was on me.

Pontius Pilate has been up to no good. Word has spread that he had his troops interrupt some Galilean worshipers and murder them. Remember this in a few weeks when we meet Pilate again and he plays all innocent. The people are scared. And Jesus knows what happens when scared religious people try to make sense of such evil. They come up with things like “They must have deserved it” or “God has a plan” or “Well, they were Galileans, not quite as pious as folks from Jerusalem.” They try to let God off the hook for bad stuff happening by blaming those who suffer. And Jesus knows that this response extends to accidents and natural disasters as well, so he brings up the tower that fell. I need only say

“Orlando shooting” and “Hurricane Katrina” to confirm that, yeah, scared religious people still say ridiculous things in the face of tragedy.

This kind of self-righteous sewage serves many awful purposes, but only a single useful one: to make the one spewing it feel better and more secure and less afraid. Jesus being Jesus, he’s got a problem with that. He wants the crowd to realize that if God is making bad things happen to people based on a strict accounting of sin, well we’d all better be watching out for Roman troops and towers.

Jesus is trying to show the way - the way to life and light and the reign of God. It’s a stony way and all you get to carry is a cross. It’s not easy. It looks like the way might be leading toward death. And, frankly, it is. It’s the path of standing up for the vulnerable and questioning authority and prejudices and pointing out that the system is broken. That leads to death, as we’ll see. But it is the way. And while you may have been told that the only way is life and death, this way is life and death and life. Jesus wants us to follow him on this way, but we veer off into the bramble. We’d rather perish.

Jesus demands repentance. We’ve talked here before about how the verb “to repent” means “to change your thinking, to understand at a higher level, to transform.” It’s literally “beyond the mind.” Repentance means we turn from the way that’s not working and toward a new way. Repent. Don’t go the way of perishing. Repent. The way you’re going isn’t working.

When I was in elementary school, I got pulled out of class a couple times a week to go work with a special ed teacher. It was horribly embarrassing, even though I was the biggest nerd in a class full of nerds. I would spend that time in a classroom with a group of other kids with visual disabilities. In that group was Ivan. To me, a first grader, this fifth grader seemed unbelievably tall and he wore a leather jacket, so he was pretty cool too.

One day, the whole group played a game of Charades. When it was Ivan’s turn, he carefully indicated that he was thinking of a television show, three words. He then moved his fist around in a circle, parallel to the ground, starting at his belt. We all looked at each other with some confusion. Was he a witch, stirring his cauldron? Was he scattering seed? Was he the Indy 500? We threw all the words we could think of at him, and he just kept shaking his head and making his circles.

After several minutes and well over a hundred circles, our very patient teacher, Ms. Solomon, interrupted him: “Hey, Ivan?” He paused, mid-circle, and looked up at her through his impossibly thick glasses. “Ivan, why don’t you try a different motion?” He considered it for a full ten seconds, then replied, “No. I like this one.” [The answer was “Wheel of Fortune,” by the way.]

In every generation, God’s people seem bound and determined to do it their way, regardless of how little fruit that way bears. “For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none.” The gardener wants to give the tree one more chance to bear fruit. The gardener will get serious with the fig tree. See how it handles some, ahem, manure thrown its way. There is time for the tree to respond. There is time for the tree to bear fruit. To transform. To go a different way. The way of life, and not only of death.

A few weeks ago, when we were having one of those epic Alabama thunderstorms, I drove through a puddle that was considerably deeper than it looked. Before I could even utter “Oops!” I suddenly felt a strange sensation in the steering wheel. I was turning right, but the wheels weren’t budging. I’d later discover that the belt had slipped, disabling the power steering, but in the moment I suddenly became a 1920s gangster and muscled that steering wheel until I guided the car into a parking lot. For a second there, I was steering, but the car wasn’t responding. It wasn’t receiving the message I was sending. It took a whole bunch of extra force to get those wheels to go the right way.

Jerusalem, Jerusalem - the holy city. The scene of the crimes. The center of faith. The center of unfaithfulness. The prophets have gone there with their messages: listen to God, care for the poor, embrace the downtrodden, welcome the stranger. Those messages have not been received. “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!” Jesus is going there. He’s going *that* way. He’s not afraid of Herod. In fact, he sends that fox his itinerary. Jesus is going the way of repentance, the way of life, and death, and life. He is going to the very center of the resistance to God’s way.

This prophet will be killed in Jerusalem. And the people of God will have done it their way again, abandoning the path set before them. But it will be different this time. For the foxes have done their worst, but the mother hen returns. Though we resist at every turn — shrugging off repentance and making a mad dash for a shiny object as far from this hard calling as possible, Jesus won’t give up on chasing us down and gathering us under holy wings.

The question for a follower of Christ, for a church that seeks to be his hands and feet, and perhaps for a nation that claims to be based on Christian values, is whether we will let ourselves be found off the trail and turned around and transformed in order to bear fruit. That takes humility and reflection and honesty and vulnerability and a whole lot of courage. Veering into the cookies and oncoming traffic and may be the way of death, but it’s easier. It requires no strength. It’s what we know. But humility and reflection and honesty and courage and repentance — those are words that make up Lent. They are pebbles in our shoes, reminding us of the way our Lord calls us to travel.