

God's Right Turns - a New Chapter

Back in 2007 (over 13 years ago) I preached a sermon I've never forgotten because it has been applicable through the years. It was called "God's Right Turns." And now it's applicable again for Keith and I – and for our church. It was based on Peter's surprising new direction from God after Jesus rose from the dead and gave the Great Commission.

God has a way of recycling His truths in our lives over time! So, let me walk us through how God did a right turn with Peter and then share how God has directed us in our surprise move to Florida.

After His resurrection Jesus met several of the apostles by the Sea of Tiberias. This was when he reinstated Peter as their leader (Jn.21). He would plant the new church through him (Mt. 16:18-19). Right before Christ's ascension, Peter and the others went to a mountain in Galilee as Jesus instructed. There Christ gave them his final commands based on his authority in heaven and earth and His promised presence with them always. The disciples were told to *Go and make disciples of all nations – the word is "ta ethne," all people groups – baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you.* (Mt. 28:18-20) Go and make disciples, baptizing and teaching them. These were commands, not options. They are foundational to our own church at New Hope.

Yet, commentators agree as you study Peter and his later actions, that Peter probably interpreted that call to witness to everyone within a Jewish framework. He accepted the command for action to go and make disciples and he was ready to obey. But he thought he was to go to the Jews and god-fearers attracted to the monotheism of Judaism throughout the Diaspora. So, that's what he did and that's the audience he addresses in his First Epistle. Peter likely heard Christ's words through his own filters. That's where he was comfortable and that's what he understood.

But his filters were not accurate for the next stage of God's kingdom agenda.

That's just like us, isn't it? We have selective hearing and can tune the Lord out. So, Peter needed an object lesson to get God's direction straight. And an object lesson he got! Luke tells the story in Acts 10. By this time the Holy Spirit had come on the disciples and Peter had delivered several of his powerful sermons that brought thousands of Jews to faith in Christ in Jerusalem. He had healed people and even raised a disciple named Tabitha from the dead in the nearby town of Joppa. While he was still there, he went up to the rooftop to pray and falling into a trance, he "*saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to the earth by its 4 corners.*"(Acts 10:11) In the sheet were pigs and many four-footed animals as well as *reptiles and birds* that were forbidden food for Jews. But a voice told him, "*Get up Peter, kill and eat.*" "*Surely not, Lord!*" Peter replied, "*I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.*" Peter's response was that of any good Jew who kept the dietary laws in Leviticus (Lev. 11).

But God had a different direction for Peter: "*Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.*"(Acts 10:15) The dialogue occurred 3 times so Peter could make no mistake about it. And just then Gentiles – those whom Jews thought were unclean – appeared at the door of the house looking for Peter. Cornelius, a Roman army officer in Caesarea, was a devout god-fearer and he too had seen a vision – an angel of the Lord told him to go to Joppa and bring Peter back to his home. While Peter was still probably arguing with God about his vision, *the Spirit said to him, "Simon, 3 men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them."* The next day Peter went and told the crowd Cornelius had assembled "*You are well aware that it is against our law*

for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone unclean. May I ask why you sent for me?" Cornelius told him about his vision and then Peter gave his first sermon to Gentiles, starting with these words: *"I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts people from every nation who fear him and do what is right."* From there he went on to tell the good news about Jesus, and the Holy Spirit came on all those Gentiles – a situation that was totally unexpected and outside the box of the Jewish Christians' thinking. It's to Peter's credit that he recognized God's hand and commanded that the Gentiles be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 10:48) because they had received the Holy Spirit, just as the Jews had at Pentecost – but without their first becoming Jews. It was a stunning change of direction for Peter and the believers with him. God had done a right turn.

Peter serves as our model today because God's object lesson – to help Peter get his calling straight – took Peter on a journey he had not anticipated when he heard Christ's commission. Peter, "a moderately orthodox Jew with his inherited prejudices against Gentiles, was the one who first crossed the barriers which separated Jews from Gentiles and brought the apostolic message to Gentiles." (F.F. Bruce, Acts, p. 217, 214, 226.) **He** was the one God chose to expand Christianity from a Jewish religion to a world religion" (J.M. Boice, Acts, p. 181.). Isn't that wonderful how God can transform us and use us? Peter was a common man but he had been with Jesus and God took his devotion and made something wonderful out of him, because Peter obeyed and was open to God's directives. It's in this adventure of obedience that we can experience "God's right turns," just like Peter did. You are going along, following the Lord, trying to obey and suddenly the direction turns toward a future you had not imagined.

This has happened to Keith in his theology about women.☺ It happened to me in getting a PhD and being a senior pastor. These directions weren't initially on my radar screen. But God took a right turn each time and when that happens, you have to choose. Do you follow this radical change of thought and plans or do you continue doing what is comfortable for you and justify your disobedience on the basis of your past history with God or your interpretation of His will as you read His Word by yourself? In other words, beloved, what do you do when God calls you beyond your expectations or comfort zone to follow Him in a new direction?

And that brings us to our Florida move. Many of you know that I have been asking God for over a year if and when I need to retire from the church. I have been wondering about the future with Keith's Alzheimers and how this is supposed to play out. And until January, I had assumed we would go down to Florida for 2 months to escape the snow and ice but come back to our home with all of you and continue the ministry of the church. This is my heart and my calling. And God has used us in this house, in this location, with so many dear internationals who have been with us and have now gone out around the world. He created a house of nurture and community and prayer and belonging – for all those who left all that in their home country to study in a country where they do not belong, where they are working in a second and third language, where the educational style is different and the expectations and support of home is absent.

As I was praying about the future, I had assumed...And therewith lies the issue

When God does a right turn, He turns our own assumptions upside down and says, 'Listen, to me, I am doing a new thing, do you now perceive it?' (Isa. 49) God has used the object lesson of our living in Florida for 2 months with Bruce and Becky to get our heart on His new pathway. So let me share ways He has been doing that.

First of all, when we got to Florida, my heart was struck with the beauty – the palm trees, the flowers, the Spanish architecture, the blue skies, the water (lakes and ponds everywhere). Ever since I became a Christian, God has spoken powerfully to me through His creative beauty. And so my heart rejoiced and I felt a renewal of my spirit. This continues every day.

Second, the warm weather has been a boon as well. It is much better for Keith (who was so often cold in Chicago) and of course much safer for both of us to be out of the snow and ice as well as the cold! So, we are actually healthier and happier here. At this stage of our lives, that is no small factor.

Third, we have been living with Bruce and Becky for over a month and that turns out to be a blessing to both Keith and I. In fact, even when the thought came to move down here, I was looking for us to just buy our own house here. But B+B said, “No; that’s not good for you. We think we should all 4 live together.” Wow! A right turn on top of a right turn that I did not anticipate. But we love their companionship and Keith does better with them around! Yah!

Fourth, people have always been the key to my sense of calling and purpose. The hardest part of this move is no longer being physically present with all of you and the other members of New Hope who have already gone back to home country. However, there are 3 key Christian organizations all headquartered here in southeast Orlando: Pioneers, Wycliffe Bible translators and Campus Crusade for Christ. They range in number from about 150 staff to 1,500 staff. I am hopeful to see how God connects us in friendship and ministry. I am beginning to meet some of them and share their global missions heart. Since so many of them are also newcomers to the state, they are open to new ventures, new friendships and God’s opportunities. As Alex would say, “we will see...”

Fifth, Orlando is a top vacation destination spot, so I am confident I will see many of you again, and hopefully repeatedly!! The house we are buying with Bruce and Becky will have at least one extra guest room, so come on down, you’all! It will be an encouragement to have these reunions when you come and visit. Or better yet, relocate here in Orlando and we can continue to do ministry together!

And sixth, there is a sense of urgency to make the move. God has really surprised us with this major right turn. It was unexpected and I know it has created turmoil for you all there. I am so sorry. But because we don’t know the rate of Keith’s progression, our whole extended family feels it is important to move this spring/summer while he can still enjoy it, recognize people, feel comfortable in this new setting, and be cared for by all of us. Six reasons that have come out of the object lesson of coming to Florida for 2 months and living with Bruce and Becky.

But, obedience is costly, isn’t it?

Peter was sharply criticized by the parent church in Jerusalem for what they interpreted as his outrageous behavior. Those criticisms must have been hard for him. Some of the Jewish Christian leaders were highly educated in the law and he was not; some of them were men of privilege and he was from fisherman stock. And though the Spirit anointed him as a leader from Pentecost onwards, he was a people pleaser in personality so that opposition must have been costly emotionally.

Plus, there are times when people think we are disobedient or watch us fail in our faith journey. This is why I included the story in Mt. 14 today. When Peter stepped out over the gunnel of the boat and walked on the waves to Jesus, the disciples must have thought this was aghast and even tried to dissuade him. But Peter walked by Jesus’ power. He only started to sink when he took his eyes off Jesus and looked at the storm swirling around him. Then his faith faltered and the disciples witnessed that. That’s the reality of a faith walk. We can rise to great heights in obedience and then tumble from those heights in fear and lack of faith. Our own move to Florida has had these times of vision and hope and purpose and then times of question about timing, selling and buying, the future for each of you and the church, and logistics of all sorts. We all need to give each other grace and mercy whenever someone steps out

over the gunnel of his/her comfortable life and answers Jesus' call to "Come." Only Jesus can keep us on His pathway as we stay focused on Him.

So, beloved, what right turn might God want you to make? What object lesson is He using to get you on His pathway, just as living with Bruce and Becky has caused our redirection? If a right turn is looming, then step out in faith and see the new thing He will do in your life. He is trustworthy. And, hopefully, our community, who may also grieve your loss, may offer you their prayers and support and encouragement as many of you are doing for Keith and I.

My prayer for us all is that we live out the words to our song of response: *I will Follow* by Chris Tomlin
Dr. Mary Lou 2/9/20

I will Follow:

Where You go, I'll go, where You stay, I'll stay;

When you move, I'll move, I will follow You.

All your ways are good, all your ways are sure, I will trust in You alone.

Higher than my sight, higher than my life, I will live for you alone.

Where You go, I'll go, where You stay, I'll stay

When you move, I'll move, I will follow You.

Who You love, I'll love, how you serve, I'll serve,

If this life I lose, I will follow you.

I will follow You.

Where You go, I'll go, where You stay, I'll stay

When you move, I'll move, I will follow You.

Who You love, I'll love, how you serve, I'll serve,

If this life I lose, I will follow you.

I will follow You.

Amen.