

May 15, 2022

Texts: Psalm 148; Acts 11:1-9

Title: "On God's Side or In God's Way?"

I want to start by going back into TV history. Some of you grew up watching the Roadrunner cartoons. In it there was a character named Wile E. Coyote. Wile E. Coyote's virtually endless quest in life was to capture his nemesis, the Roadrunner. The coyote was incredibly persistent in doing this even though he failed every time. He'd fall off of high cliffs or get blown up or get flattened by large, heavy falling objects.

On several occasions the coyote chased the roadrunner into a long, dark tunnel, so dark that all that you could see were his eyes, shining in the blackness. He stopped for a moment, not knowing what to do. Then he would see a light at the end of the tunnel and head for it, only to discover at the last minute--when it was too late--that the light belonged to an oncoming locomotive. So the coyote got plowed down and flattened, again, and the object of his chase, yet again, eluded him.

Maybe there've been times when you felt that you'd been flattened by a locomotive. At times like that I've prayed for the ability to get back on my feet. Most of us can relate.

But today I'd like to apply the metaphor of the oncoming locomotive to the coming of the God's kingdom. And the question I'd like to ask is this--**are there times when we find ourselves like Wile E. Coyote standing in the way of God's oncoming kingdom?**

In our lesson today from the book of Acts, the early disciples of Jesus are confronted with a critical turning point. All of them in the church at this time were Jewish. This was important to many of them. The Jewish faith had drawn much of its strength from its exclusivity. They saw themselves as set apart to be a holy people. They clung to the belief that the Gentiles (non-Jews) were in some way unclean, unfit to play a role in the church.

Then something quite unsettling occurred. Word was spreading that Gentiles were being accepted into the faith and that even the Apostle Peter, their leader was part of this movement. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, those Christians who prided themselves on their Jewish backgrounds criticized him. They'd heard reports that he'd not only entered the houses of uncircumcised Gentiles, but he actually had eaten with them. This was hard for them to take.

So Peter came and told them the story of how he had evolved towards this position of being more accepting towards the Gentiles. He was in the city of Joppa. You can read the whole story in Acts chapter ten. It ends up with Peter meeting up with a gentile named Cornelius and others who wanted to hear about Jesus. Finally, Peter is won over and says, "if God gave them the same gift [of the Spirit], who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?" (v 17).

We should be thankful for this work of God to change attitudes in the time of the early church or else those of us who are from non-Jewish backgrounds wouldn't be in the church today. "Who was I," said Simon Peter, "to think that I could stand in

God's way?" **Peter came to understand that it was actually God's will to throw open the doors of the church to all who would be saved, including Gentiles.**

I want us to think for a moment of possibly other times in our history when Christians have stood in God's way. Are there times in the church when we've been or are a bit like Wile E. Coyote?

Now the church has been at the forefront of a lot of positive changes that have happened over the years but to a large extent though we're really afraid of change. Of course, some changes are not a good thing but more often than not we find out later that they were for the good and we were the last to believe it.

Over two hundred years ago, in Gloucester, England, a man named Robert Raikes started a movement which was to have a tremendous impact on the moral and religious life of the Western world. He began the Sunday school movement. He selected four women who gathered a group of kids together on Sundays to teach them reading and the church catechism.

Believe it or not, the Sunday school movement was resisted by the established church. Some of the leaders actually feared that such a program would lead to popular education which in turn would lead to revolution. And then there were some who sincerely believed that the Sabbath day was for worship and rest only, not for recreation or for school. One Scottish preacher feared that such Sunday Schools would "destroy all family religion."

I guess my point this morning is that when it comes to looking at the mission and

purpose for a church, what we believe in, and how we conduct ourselves, **it's important to see how God has worked to change us in the past and how God is continuing to mold and shape the church today.**

A member of one of my former churches told me of a youth minister the church called back in the late 60's who grew a beard and long hair. And, according to this person, he ended up getting fired because of it apparently, even though he had developed a good ministry with the young people.

I suspect that all of us are guilty at times of passing judgment on people who are different from us. People who think differently, act differently, people who have conflicting opinions that rub us the wrong way.

A woman I once knew regretted for years having taken to task a young man who came to the church over the type of clothing he wore to and afterwards she never saw him there again.

Many organizations attract a certain kind of person. If you or I were going to have friends over for an evening, would they not most likely be people who live and act and dress the way we do? But the church, the church of Jesus Christ, is different. It's one of the few organizations that absolutely needs everyone, all ages, all types of people, if it is going to be all that God wants it to be. So we interact with people that we would normally never have anything to do with cause that's the way that God wants it to be.

**Am I on God's side or in God's way?** I don't think its one way or the other. For me, it's a mixed bag. I have a mixed record on that and so I'm grateful that God loves me anyway. But like anything else. There's always room for improvement, for changed attitudes, for taking a great welcoming spirit that we have here and growing it to an even greater level both in this place and anywhere in the name of Jesus.

Amen.