

A ROUNDABOUT WAY OF LIVING

2 Corinthians 13: 11-13 Matthew 28: 16-20

Have you ever felt as if your life was just going around in circles? Well, there might actually be a reason for that. More and more cities, including Eau Claire, are choosing a new approach to traffic control. Inspired by our friends across the Atlantic, city planners are more and more replacing traditional traffic signals and stop signs with more efficient roundabouts. Depending upon the route I take, I will go through one or sometimes two roundabouts every day as I go to work. Proponents of roundabouts tout them as the answer to the modern-day scourge of traffic congestion. Naysayers avoid them like the plague and curse them to high heaven. But roundabouts, love them or hate them, are here to stay and will be seen more and more.

The change to roundabouts has been especially popular in states such as Arizona, which has experienced a 40% growth in population during the last 30 years; and with that kind of growth there are bound to be conflicts. Yet gone now are the long lines at intersections while drivers grip their steering wheels grimly waiting for a green light. Instead of drivers stopping, waiting, and starting again according to the changing lights, roundabouts encourage traffic to keep moving in slower, but smoother, patterns. Traffic engineers have discovered that roundabouts are safer, cause less air and noise pollution, and are more efficient than stop-and-go traffic experienced at traditional intersections. There is also the 21st century phenomenon of those who think that once the light turns red that 4 more cars are allowed to sneak through the intersection. I know that when my light turns green, I need to count to 5 to allow for the driver who is going

to zoom through the intersection because the red light is only for the car behind them. This “just one more car” mindset leads to a lot of accidents; many of them are serious because of the accelerated speed and impacting at 90-degree angles – POW! And the damage can be significant. Yet on roundabouts, when accidents do occur, they’re less severe because cars are moving at a slower pace and in the same direction, rather than barreling through the intersection in an attempt to beat the light and then hitting perpendicularly. POW! The statistics in Arizona prove the theory: injuries in traffic accidents at intersections are down by 75%, while the number of fatal accidents has decreased by a staggering 90%. And why is this? Because the emphasis at roundabouts is on cooperation rather than competition in driving.

If roundabouts existed in the first century, St Paul might have used them as an example for ordering life in the faith community. In churches, as in roundabouts, people need to pay attention to one another in order to get along and thrive. You see, in roundabouts there has to be give and take; you have to get in the simple groove of looking out for other drivers to your left. It takes a certain amount of education, adjustment, and good will on the part of all concerned, but once drivers are accustomed to these roundabouts, improved efficiency and safety result. And these changing traffic patterns are instructive to anyone attempting to live and work together, including those who seek to follow in the steps of Jesus Christ.

In the previous chapters of his letter St. Paul has been pretty critical of the fractures that have developed among the community of faith in Corinth. He speaks his mind pretty clearly and

bluntly; at times he basically tells the Corinthians to grow up. But in the brief words of benediction we hear today from the close of his letter, St Paul's tone abruptly changes. Rather than ending on a harsh note, he extends a message of grace and peace. A benediction, by definition, is a final 'good word' that concludes a gathering of believers. St Paul's benediction is this: *Put things in order – agree with one another – live in peace.* Simple, and easy to remember. The Corinthians are on their own now, and Paul leaves them with careful instructions on how to live together as the body of Christ. It is now up to these young Christians to take Paul's instructions to heart.

I don't think anyone could argue with Paul's vision; every community desires to be successful and to live in peace with one another. The challenge is often found in the process. I have to wonder if the Corinthians looked on the backside of Paul's parchment in search of some further instructions. I can envision them looking at each other and asking, "Is that it? Isn't he going to give us more details or specific things to do? Sure, we can have the goal of agreeing with one another and living in peace, but..... how do we get there? How do we do that?" If you know Christian history at all, you know that Paul's words are easier said than done. We can humorously talk about why, especially in the South, there are so many Baptist churches. The serious answer is because every time their members start to disagree about something, they simply split off and form a new congregation. Pow! Yet before we chuckle too much about Baptists, we as Lutherans have to acknowledge that we have had splits in recent times as we have wrestled with what it truly means to be an inclusive church, and whether God truly loves

and welcomes all people. This issue split Grace Lutheran Church right here in Eau Claire not that long ago. Sometimes, we are not that different than those ornery Corinthians.

So, what do we do? Paul is offering here wisdom that families, congregations, work groups, clubs, organizations and even our entire nation can use. He is simply stating this: agree or not in certain things, we all have to pull together; let's be mindful of one another and find ways to get moving in the same direction. We, as Christians, are called to set an example and lead the way. So, what does this mean in the midst of our polarizing partisanship in Wisconsin or as a nation? For the last couple of decades our politics has been at 90 degrees (POW!), and the damage has been extensive to our national cohesion, let alone our spirits and mental health. Or what does it mean when disaster strikes a community in another state – be it a tornado or flood, a toxic railway spill, yet another school shooting, or a collapsing apartment building? Do you remember the scenes of dust-covered people running down the streets of Manhattan on September 11? When we respond to people in crisis, do we first ask what their views are on abortion? Before we give aid do we ask them whether they are straight or gay, Republican or Democrat, Christian or Muslim or Jewish? No, because we instinctively know that in times of challenge we must care for each other, listen to each other, love one another, and live together as people of peace and respect. We have our differences, sure. But we realize we are all trying to move in the same direction. So, the challenging question we face is this: Why would we only live this way in times of tragedy? Wouldn't this be the most faithful way to live every day? There would be far less destruction and pain. So, why doesn't this happen?

Living in community is much like driving on a roundabout, and Paul simply presents us the necessary rules for the road. At times, it will be necessary to yield, slow down, or yes (gasp), even to just stop and let the other person go through first. Just like careful drivers, we are urged to keep our eyes on the road, to not allow ourselves to become distracted by cell phones or the box of McDonald's french fries on our lap, nor by whether the couple visiting with us for the first time is a man and a woman, or 2 women, or 2 men, and simply keep attention on caring for all the people who are also on the roundabout with us.

Perhaps Paul's benediction could be reworded something like this (and I paraphrase): Farewell brothers and sisters. Remember that we are all traveling in the same direction. Trust each other enough to share the road. Wish other people well on their travels. Let's endeavor to agree on the general direction we're traveling, knowing that we can work through our differences. At times, we may bump into one another, but because we're all traveling together and in the same general direction we can handle the collisions without too much damage. Acknowledge the differences that exist, but celebrate the larger agreement we share in Jesus Christ, and then live in such a way.

As we heard earlier, at the conclusion of St Matthew's Gospel, the Risen Lord sends his disciples forth with these words: "*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them*

in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” That is quite a task – and a long road to travel. Could there be differences of opinion on how to do that? Could there be some collisions? You bet! But roundabouts are a wonderful vision of God’s people traveling together, toward the shared destination of Christ’s Great Commission. With good will and God’s grace, and with the gifts of bread and wine in which all are invited to partake, we can journey on this road together. And just as in the movement of our cars, the casualties will be minimal while moving in the same direction, and it will be good for our overall environment. So, please, in this summer travel season, drive and live safely and faithfully. Amen.

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