

Driven Men Sunday, 7/19/20

I hope you know that this message is called “Driven Men,” not because women can’t be driven as well, but because I’m using the story of three men from the Bible to illustrate it, and one man in particular, the Apostle Paul. Women will get equal time next week, when we look at three mothers in the Gospels.

What does it mean to be driven? It has more to do with that racing car we saw Ottie Otness driving at the beginning of worship than you might think. I want you to imagine you’re sitting behind the steering wheel of a racing car like Ottie’s. A car needs at least three basic things to be driven- someone or something to provide direction by controlling the steering wheel, an engine to provide forward momentum, and a method of slowing down or stopping. Even self-driving cars need those things. So we might say a race car is “driven” if it has high speed and tight control of direction, slowing down or stopping as seldom as possible.

Do you remember reading that P.D. Eastman early reader, “Go, Dog. Go!”? I read that book so many times with my children that I memorized the lines. “Go, dogs. Go! The light is green now...Stop, dogs. Stop! The light is red.” And then there was that whole bit about, “Do you like my hat? No, I do not like your hat!” And that’s about all you need to know about that book! Here’s the thing- we live our lives like cars. Our lives need steering to control direction. Our lives need power to provide forward momentum. And our lives need a method of slowing down or stopping.

All of us need those things, and we’re all driven in different ways and to different extents. But some people are spectacularly driven, living their lives as if the accelerator is pushed to the floor, the car is heading straight for the goal, regardless of any obstacles that may fall in the way, and either the brake line has been cut or the driver has completely forgotten about the brake pedal.

Driven people can get places very quickly, as long as they’re heading in a straight line or driving on a simple oval track without any other drivers on it. But changing direction? Forget that! Imagine if the drivers competing in the Indianapolis 500 had to change direction after every lap. Not only would that slow down the race, I’m guessing it would make a dangerous sport even more prone to accidents.

How about you? Would you describe yourself as driven? What controls your direction in life? Where does your forward momentum come from? Do you know what it means to hit the brakes once in a while?

The Bible is full of stories about driven people, and the Apostle Paul, a.k.a. Saul, has to be one of the most obvious examples. Saul's direction was unwavering and clear. In his own words, "I was circumcised when I was eight days old. I am a pure-blooded citizen of Israel and a member of the tribe of Benjamin—a real Hebrew if there ever was one! I was a member of the Pharisees, who demand the strictest obedience to the Jewish law. I was so zealous that I harshly persecuted the church. And as for righteousness, I obeyed the law without fault."¹ Everything that Saul did bore the marks of a driven man. His direction was the persecution of Christ followers. His forward momentum came from his rigid understanding and practice of God's law. And his means of slowing down or stopping? He didn't seem to have any.

In our first reading, we heard the account of Saul's witness and approval of the martyrdom of Stephen, as well as his rampage of persecution against the first Christians. Saul was a runaway car on his way to Damascus, when Christ intervened and slammed on the brakes, blinding Saul with his presence and sending him on to Damascus to get his 100,000 mile maintenance overhaul. Let's pick up Saul's story now in Acts 9, beginning with verse 10 in the New Living Translation.

{Read Acts 9:10-22 NLT}

When I say we serve a God of second chances, I usually mean that God is gracious in fixing the flats of our lives and occasionally replacing our timing belts. But sometimes we're driving our lives in directions that are completely at odds with God's purposes, and our second chances come about as radical reorientations of our lives. That's clearly what happened to Saul, his Hebrew name, whom we now usually call Paul, his Gentile name. God gave Saul a top-to-bottom rebuild. His forward momentum went from a rigid understanding and practice of God's law to a Spirit-led understanding and practice of God's grace. His direction went from persecuting Christ's Church to building it up. What's really amazing

¹ Philippians 3:5-6. New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

about Saul/Paul is that he remained a driven man after his conversion. That same zeal Saul had for the law was transformed into zeal for the grace of Jesus. That unflagging energy spent hauling Christians to jail became redirected toward proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ and organizing and mobilizing a network of churches. And perhaps for the first time in his life, Paul learned about brakes, attending to the prompting of the Holy Spirit and patiently enduring shipwreck and imprisonment.

It may be that you're not as driven as Paul. But all of us are driven to some extent. What direction are you driving your life in? Do you need to slow down, change what's fueling your momentum, or perhaps let go of the steering wheel more often?

We heard the story of Francis Collins earlier in our Second Chances Story segment. Collins must have been a driven man in order to become the leader of the Human Genome Project. His mastery of physics, chemistry, and the scientific tools and methods necessary to lead this kind of research would have required sustained momentum and direction. And yet, the velocity of his life had turned him into what he called an "obnoxious atheist." What could possibly have changed that? Only God.

It was another one-time atheist turned inspired writer and theologian, who first slowed down Collins in his headlong race- C.S. Lewis. But it was the Holy Spirit, speaking through the revelation of God's creation in a frozen waterfall in the Cascade Mountains, that finally turned Collins around. As he described his experience, "At that moment, I felt my resistance leave me. And it was a great sense of relief. The next morning, in the dewy grass in the shadow of the Cascades, I fell on my knees and accepted this truth — that God is God, that Christ is his son and that I am giving my life to that belief."²

Think about a time in your life when God offered you a second chance with a complete turn-around in some way. Did you take that chance? Are you ready to take it today? I wonder how God spoke, or is still speaking to you, even today?

In the Gospel of John, we encounter two more driven men that would be easy to miss, because they play such a small role in the story. We read in chapter 19 that after the crucifixion of Jesus, "Afterward Joseph of Arimathea, who had been a secret disciple of

² Joel Furches. www.examiner.com

Jesus (because he feared the Jewish leaders), asked Pilate for permission to take down Jesus' body. When Pilate gave permission, Joseph came and took the body away. With him came Nicodemus, the man who had come to Jesus at night. He brought about seventy-five pounds of perfumed ointment made from myrrh and aloes. Following Jewish burial custom, they wrapped Jesus' body with the spices in long sheets of linen cloth."³

What makes these driven men so unique? The Scripture make it clear that while they were both open to a new forward momentum with Jesus, they were trying to steer their lives in a direction that maintained the status and safety of their position. Before the crucifixion of Jesus, neither man was willing to openly associate with Jesus, with Nicodemus going so far as to visit Jesus in the dark of night so that he wouldn't be seen.

Have you been in their shoes, a secret admirer of Jesus in your heart, but afraid of what others might say if you declared your allegiance openly? Even in his death, Jesus was powerfully persuasive, and gave Joseph and Nicodemus a second chance to go "all-in," publicly demonstrating that their lives had taken a new direction with Jesus.

We all stand in need of second chances. We can all benefit from examining the direction we're taking in life, what propels us on our journeys, and what, if anything, allows us to slow down or stop. We might need a second chance in a relationship, a second chance to be trusted, a second chance to get the job done right, a second chance in school, or even a second chance at an apology. You can have those second chances as you learn to trust in Jesus.

Sometimes our need for a second chance is even bigger. Sometimes we need a second chance to turn our lives around completely, to surrender control of our lives to God more radically and let more of our forward momentum come from God's Word and Holy Spirit instead of our ambition and idolatry. If that's you today, then take heart. The Bible, and the last 2,000 years of recorded history is full of driven people who took the second chances God offered them and turned their lives around. That can be you this very day.

³ John 19:38-40. New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

Please take some time now to reflect on any life course-corrections you need to take to be where Jesus wants you to be. If you like, you can share a comment or a prayer on Facebook.



Bill Reinhart, Pastor
pastorbill@buffaloumc.com