



This past August Nancy and I traveled to Philadelphia for a family reunion. When we checked into our hotel we were excited to learn that a brand-new LA Fitness Center had opened not far away. Because we're members of LA Fitness here in Burnsville we could use the new facility in Philly. So, the next morning we put on our workout clothes and hopped in the car. It didn't matter that we didn't know the area. We had the address and we had GPS. We plugged the address in and off we went. After about 10 minutes Nancy said, "Something's wrong. I didn't think that it was this far away." Silly Nancy! Who knows their way around Philadelphia better – Google or a girl from Duluth? Apparently, a girl from Duluth. The GPS led us to a cul du sac in the middle of nowhere and insisted that the new LA Fitness was 400 feet in front of us, but the only thing 400 feet in front of us was a wooded lot. As we sat there scratching our heads three more cars with people dressed in workout clothes drove through that same cul du sc. It seems that Google was having a bad day!

As someone with a terrible sense of direction, I love GPS. But GPS isn't always right. For instance, a 23-year-old Canadian woman was following her GPS on a foggy night and it led her right down a boat dock and into a lake.

On the journey of life and faith God gave the Israelites a map to follow. That map was called The Law. The Law was given to the people to direct them onto roads that would bless them as a people, leading them into a deeper relationship with God and one another. But as we've seen throughout the biblical story, the Israelites had a hard time following the map. Sometimes they misread it and sometimes they just ignored it. They got lost by worshiping false god, abusing the poor and powerless and living self-focused lives. And so, God sent the Israelites prophets, people who

knew the way back to God. Essentially the prophets cried out to the people, "Hey, you're going the wrong way. You're running away from God. There's danger in that direction. Turn around. Go the other way."

There's a biblical word for that kind of turning around. It's "repent". To repent means to change one's mind and to change one's direction. To repent means to stop moving away from God, make a U-turn and start moving toward God.

Joel was one of the many prophets whom God sent to call the Israelites to repent. The book that bears Joel's name is a little one – a mere three chapters long. You'll find it tucked between two other prophets, Hosea and Amos. While you're looking for in your bibles let me give you just a little background to our reading from Joel. A massive plague of locusts had struck Israel. Their crops were gone. Their livestock was dying. The people were starving. Joel spoke into this disaster, telling the people that the locusts were God's judgment on their sins. In other words, God was trying to get their attention! In today's brief passage Joel calls the people to repent, to turn around, to return to the Lord, Let's read Joel 2:12-13 [NRSV].

You'll notice that Joel wasn't calling the people to make a slight left turn. Joel was calling the people to make a whole-hearted, full-life U-turn. Why? Because they were headed in the wrong direction. A dangerous direction. And they probably didn't even know that they were in danger. They didn't know that they were lost. Not until Joel cried out and told them, calling them back to God, calling them to repent.

The truth is we're all like the Israelites. We get lost. We move in directions that endanger us, directions that move us away from God. Sometimes we're well aware we're moving in the wrong direction, and sometimes we're just like sheep. We start in the safety of the shepherd's pasture, but we nibble a little grass here, and then a little over there, and then a little more over there, and before we know it we can't see the shepherd any longer. We're lost. One little lie turns into a web of lies that we can't escape from. One risky purchase turns into a disaster of indebtedness. One dose of prescription drugs we don't really need turns into a bondage called addiction. That is not the will of God for us, and that's why we're called to live a life of repentance, a life of constant course correction.

I want to go back to the story I told you at the very beginning of this message and use it as a kind of metaphor for living a

life of repentance. I want to give you four things to consider. First, pull over. I'd have been smart to have pulled over as soon as Nancy sensed that something was wrong. Instead I didn't stop until we wound up in a cul du sac. And the truth is, if Nancy hadn't been in the car, I probably would have kept driving around. Sad, but true! As disciples, we'd be wise to pull over, to pause daily and reflect on where we are in life. What's working and what's not working? How are we feeling? What are we learning? You've probably heard us recommend the Daily Examen before, but I think it's a great tool for daily reflection. Pulling over daily and pausing for reflection is a powerful habit that can help keep us on the right road.

Second, read the map. This [holding up the Bible] is a remarkable gift from God, providing clear direction for daily living. Psalm 119:105 says, "Your word is a lamp for my feet and a light to my path." Like a good map, scripture helps us to determine where we are, where we want to be, and how we get from here to there. Sometimes you don't even know you're lost until you read the map! If I'd had a detailed map of Philadelphia that day I got lost you can be sure I would have taken it out and used it...eventually. And yet, so many of us allow the bible to simply decorate our coffee table and never open it up and read it. If you don't have a daily devotional habit, use the Daily Readings that we provide each week. In fact, this week the daily readings connect with the four steps I'm talking about right now. You might also want to consider getting involved in a small group that wrestles with scripture together, or join us for the Engage Bible Study. However you chose to do it, read the map. It makes a huge difference on the journey of life.

Third, acknowledge when you're lost. I'd be embarrassed to tell you how often I've stubbornly refused to admit that I was lost and just kept driving around. And as I said earlier I probably would have kept driving around that day in Philadelphia if Nancy hadn't been with me. And I certainly wouldn't have pulled over and asked for directions because that's how you lose your man card! Ridiculous, isn't it, how we so often stubbornly refuse to admit that we're lost? But the moment we do admit it is the moment we can begin to turn around. Let me give you the "churchy" word for admitting that you're lost: it's confession. We admit that we've blown it, that we've been traveling down a path that leads us away from God. And the sooner we acknowledge that we're lost, the sooner we confess it to God, the sooner we can turn around and start heading in the right direction. Confession isn't just something we do at weekly worship; it's a daily spiritual practice.

Fourth, turn around. That's what it means to repent, to change our mind and our direction. When we finally realize

that we're lost and admit it, the next step is to turn around to get back on the right road. When we realized that we were lost in Philadelphia we called the LA Fitness and asked for directions, and as soon as we knew the right way to go we turned around and headed in a new direction. On the journey of life we can call a faithful friend, read the map [hold up the bible] or spend time in prayer to discern the right direction to go, but at some point we have to make the commitment to make a U-turn and move in that new direction.

Let's go back to our scripture reading today from Joel and underline these words from verse 13, "Return to the LORD, your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing." You see, getting lost on the journey of life isn't an option. We all blow it. We all fail. We all wind up traveling roads that are less than God's best for us. But verse 13 tells us why we'd want to repent, to turn back to God – because God meets us with grace and mercy and steadfast love.

I don't know where you are on the journey of life today but I want us to pull over, to pause and reflect. And if, in these moments, we sense that we're on the wrong road let's admit it and commit to making a U-turn back to the One who loves us most.

Here are some verses for reflection:

"Be still and know that I am God" – Psalm 46:10. How are you doing at pausing each day to reflect on your life?

"Be alert, be present. I'm about to do something brand-new. It's bursting out! Don't you see it? There it is!" – Isaiah 43:19. What is God up to in your life?

"If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth." – 1 John 1:8. In what area of your life are you "off the map", moving away from God? Are you willing to admit that you're lost?

"Even now," declares the Lord, "return to me with all your heart." – Joel 2:12. What can you do to make a U-turn?