

What happens when you are going 80 miles per hour, literally/figuratively? Well, for one thing, you cover a lot of ground. I was surprised when Marjorie and I crossed from Iowa to South Dakota on I-29 as we went to Sioux Falls for a weekend get-away this spring. The speed limit jumped from 70 to 80 miles an hour. I have never been on a road with a speed limit of 80 mph. Marjorie reminded me that I didn't have to go that fast just because it was the posted speed limit. Not a "green" thing to do but a fun thing to do.

What happens when you are going 80 miles per hour, literally/figuratively? Well, one can miss things along the way and can cause damage even without knowing it when moving too fast. I read in the paper last month of a jogger who was hit and killed on a rural road outside of Lincoln because the driver didn't see him. The driver might have been going too fast or was distracted. When I read an article like that it reinforces my inclination to always use sidewalks or better yet, bike trails, when I go out for a run. Rural roads are dangerous because of traffic and farm dogs who like to chase, bark and sometimes bite!

I have been guilty of moving too fast around the church on Sunday mornings. That is, sometimes too fast and distracted. On a few occasions someone has told me I walked right by them and did not acknowledge their greeting or their wave to get my attention. When someone is good enough to let me know of my excess speed I am very grateful because I never intentionally walk by someone or rudely ignore someone. I am reminded that on occasion as I speed to get some time sensitive thing done before a worship service that I am wearing "blinders" in the process. It is good for me to get reminders to slow down because 80 mph can cause unintended collateral damage, like hurt feelings.

Our spiritual disciplines of prayer, meditation, times of silence remind us to slow down. Demands on our life encourage us to be quick and stay ahead of the curve. Finding a good middle ground is a healthy goal. The dynamic of moving through life with a healthy pace came to my attention when I read the background on the circumstances that Paul is addressing in our letter lesson. I call it the "capital campaign that has gone wrong." In addition, the dynamic of moving through life with a healthy pace ties in with our theme of doing all the good we can for as long as ever we can. We need to pace ourselves so we might do "good" in a regular, steady and continuous fashion.

The Apostle Paul was high energy and he was on the move to share the good news of Jesus Christ with as many people in as many towns and cities throughout the areas presently referred to as Turkey, Greece, and Italy. Paul went 80 mph, if you will, and had a clear agenda. First and foremost sharing about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and encouraging folk to become followers of Jesus. Second, after he developed a faith community in a particular town he would encourage them to remember and support the original faith community in Jerusalem.

The city of Corinth is located about 50 miles west of Athens. It was a thriving and cosmopolitan port city where the Aegean Sea and the Mediterranean Sea come together. As a port city it had residents from throughout the Roman Empire and it had its rough edges, to say the least. Yet, the words Paul shared found a warm reception and a congregation grew quickly in Corinth. He and his party did not receive beatings or imprisonments in Corinth as we true in many other cities they visited. He remained in Corinth for 18 months as he taught the basics of the faith and provided guidelines for individuals to grow as followers of Christ.

Paul also requested that the growing Corinthian congregation take an offering for the mother church in Jerusalem and provided rationale for it. First, the economy in Jerusalem was not as strong as it was in other parts of the Roman Empire. It had also experienced a famine. Therefore, the number of people in need, per capita, was greater there than in thriving cities throughout Greece and Turkey where Paul did his work. Second, Jerusalem was the location of the mother church. It was where Jesus did a great deal of his ministry, there in Judea and to the north in Galilee. It is where Jesus was crucified and resurrected. It is where the church was

born with the movement of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost Day. It is where it all started and therefore worthy of support. Lastly, Paul was personally indebted to the leadership in Jerusalem, the twelve disciples and their confirmation of his ministry.

As I noted earlier, Paul was an independent go-getter, “an acting first and getting permission later” sort of guy. Early on he persecuted the early Christian movement. Then the resurrected Christ confronted him and changed his heart. Paul tells us that following his conversion that he went to Arabia for three years and was instructed by the resurrected Christ. Paul noted he did have humans teaching him the things of Christ that he preached. He returns from Arabia to visit the Disciples in Jerusalem and spends 15 days with Simon Peter. He and Peter have the same understanding of the good news of Jesus Christ. Paul then departs and does not return to Jerusalem for 11 years. In this time period he is preaching to those who are not Jews, the Gentiles. The twelve disciples mainly share the message of Christ with fellow Jews. All the followers of Jesus in Israel follow the laws of Moses whereas the Gentiles that Paul is converting to Christianity don’t know about the laws of Moses, much less, follow them.

Those in Israel assumed that a follower of Jesus followed the laws of Moses; kosher dietary guidelines, circumcision for men, and other such laws of the Torah. That was not something Paul mentioned to the Gentiles as he shared about Jesus in other countries. He thought it would be a stumbling block so he did not mention it. Not a small oversight from the perspective of the folk back in the mother church in Jerusalem. When Paul did finally go back to Jerusalem, some 11 years later, he asked for their approval of his methodology. After some intense dialogue the “permission” was granted. Paul felt indebted to them for their understanding and willingness to approve his unique manner of bringing folk to Christ.

Well, as I noted earlier, things could not have gone better between Paul and the reception he was received in Corinth. The congregation in Corinth enthusiastically agreed to collect funds while Paul was gone visiting other cities and establishing communities of faith. Paul went to northern Greece and started congregations in Thessalonica and Philippi as well as others cities. He bragged about the Corinthian church and their eagerness to help in the collection for Jerusalem.

Well, in the mean time, Paul heard about some conversations and activities happening in Corinth in his absence that deeply troubled him. He did not have the opportunity to visit and correct the situation so he wrote his first letter to the Corinthians. He directly reprimanded them for some of their behavior and provided blunt instructions on how they should act and move forward. A number of folk in Corinth did not like the words he shared and certainly not the tone. His letter writing might fall in the “80 mph” category. It was direct and blunt whereas thoughtful and pastoral might have been the better course. In response, the folk at Corinth let Paul know that their enthusiasm for the Jerusalem collection had cooled off. Paul thought about a personal visit to Corinth but one of his colleagues, Titus, advises against it and encourages Paul to write another letter to the Corinthians that Titus will deliver. Titus had the heart of a diplomat and he knew that a thoughtful letter from Paul that Titus could deliver would find better results than Paul rushing off to Corinth at 80 mph.

That brings us to the II Corinthians and our lesson before us from chapter 8. Titus delivers the letter and with warmth and encouragement presents it. After reaffirming their relationship and their common commitment to Christ in chapters 1-7 Paul addresses the collection for the mother church in Jerusalem in chapter 8, we read in verse 7:

“Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness...
—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.”

Titus had coached Paul well. These are warm words of encouragement in his second letter to the Corinthians. I believe this sentiment was always in Paul’s heart for the Corinthians, he is not being insincere here, but in the midst of his “problem solving” approach at 80 mph in his first letter to the Corinthians these warm expressions were missing. That caused a problem and placed Paul in what was building up to be an embarrassing predicament.

The Corinthians had pledged to put together a large collection for the Jerusalem church and they would give it to Paul when he returned in about a year from his work elsewhere. Paul told the other churches he was forming about the Corinthian generosity and enthusiasm to encourage them to also take up generous offerings. Then Paul had his falling out with the Corinthians. But the congregations up north didn't know this as they jumped on board for the collection, inspired by the Corinthians. The churches in northern Greece took up offerings and were sending representatives with their gifts as Paul retraced his steps to Jerusalem which included a stop in Corinth to pick up their offering and their official delegation. It would have been very embarrassing if Corinthians had no gift and were sending no members to Jerusalem since Paul referenced them to all these others churches for their enthusiasm and generosity. His second letter to the Corinthians was crucial. That is what can happen when we react to things moving 80 mph. We can create messes that need to be cleaned up.

All of this is good instruction for us. We live in an age where our communication is much quicker than composing and sending letters. When responding to a situation, especially with emotion, it is best to catch our breath and take a moment for prayer before we press that send button on a hurriedly written e-mail, text or tweet that might include some comments we regret later. When we find that we have goofed up it is important for us to find good counsel on how to make things right as Paul did with his good friend and co-worker, Titus. Paul did make amends with the Corinthians and all went well with the offering for those in need back in Jerusalem.

The letter of II Corinthians includes ancient words that inform living in 2018. It is good to be efficient but we need to maintain a good spiritual pace through the whole of life so we can:

Do All the Good We Can
By All the Means We Can
In All the Ways We Can
In All the Places We Can
At All the Times We Can
To All the People We Can
As Long as Ever We Can