



The Potter's House, UCC

October 1, 2006

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Which bus are you on?

Luke 13:22-30

I am terrible with directions. Not just bad, but *terrible* with directions. I've always been like that. Sometimes I just can't figure out how to get from one place to another.

When I was in high school my family moved to southern Germany for a year. My father was taking a year to study psychology in Germany and Switzerland. And the whole family went along for the ride. And it was a *great* year with many adventures. Adventures happen daily when you're in a foreign country. As you might imagine, things are very different in Europe.

My brother and I were enrolled in the German school system. It took us a while to adjust. Our classes were all in German, there was a two hour lunch break in which the whole town would go home to eat a big dinner with their family – OK that wasn't too hard to adjust to – and somewhat strangely, there were no school buses. All students relied on the public transportation busses.

One afternoon my brother and I were hanging out with some friends uptown. When it got dark we figured we should head home. So we said goodbye to our pals and boarded the next bus. The problem was that we got on the wrong bus. We ended up in a small town about 25 miles away from our home. I only realized the seriousness of our dilemma when the bus driver pulled into an unfamiliar bus station, turned the engine off, and got off. I had to call our parents to have them come pick us up. Although I felt embarrassed by the incident, I at least was able to console myself – as it *can* be difficult to catch the right bus when you're in a different country with a different language.

Years later, when I was in college, I didn't have a car. I couldn't afford one. And once again, as if it were some sick cosmic joke, I had to rely on the public transportation busses. It was a good bus system if I paid close attention to which bus I was boarding. And even though I was enrolled in a well-respected university, I still occasionally managed to take the wrong bus.

It was during my college years that I read a story about a man who boarded a bus with the desire and intention of going from Boston to Detroit. At the end of his long trip, he found himself not in Detroit, but in Kansas City. He'd caught the wrong bus. It made me think that this must happen more than people realize. Maybe it's happened often enough that it's become part of our shared human experience. There are people who start out with plans for a good destination. Maybe they want the best things in life; a good education, happiness, a secure job, a healthy family, and friends they can rely on in times of trouble. But somehow, in spite of their good desires and intentions, they find themselves somewhere else.

The man who started out for Detroit and ended up in Kansas City didn't believe it at first. As he stepped from the bus, he asked the driver how to get to Woodward Avenue. When the bus driver told him there was no Woodward Avenue, the man became irate. He *knew* there was a Woodward Avenue in Detroit. He was sure of it! And it took him some time to face the fact that he, despite his desire and intention, was not where he wanted to be. He'd caught the wrong bus.

Do you remember the story of the prodigal son? He probably didn't start out with the intention of landing in a swine pen feeding someone else's pigs. When he was young, he asked his father for his share of the future inheritance. He cashed it in. Then he headed out into the world to find happiness, freedom, and adventure. He had admirable goals. His intended destination was good. But when he found himself at rock bottom, nibbling on the very food the pigs were eating, he realized he wasn't where he had wanted to be. He'd caught the wrong bus.

So it started me thinking. ***Maybe the destination we reach depends not so much on our ideals, as the bus we catch.*** We all want the good things in life; a safe home, a healthy family, good standing in the community, a good school system for our kids, and a life that is somehow touched by God. These are fine intentions for good destinations. But sometimes we let it go at that. We remain content with these ideals. But if we want to make these ideals a reality then we have to ask ourselves the hard question, "*Are we on the road that leads to where we want to go? Are we on the right bus?*"

I used to think Jesus created these high ideals – ideals that we should set our hopes on, ideals we should strive for. And while that's certainly true, Jesus didn't forget the other half of the process. I think Jesus summed this other side up when he said, "Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able" (Luke 13:22-30). It's easy for us to desire the right things, but are we willing to travel the road that leads to our

destination? It's one thing to desire a goal, but it's another to fulfill the conditions it takes to reach that goal. We can't get to the right place on the wrong bus.

This past Friday I took my ethics class to hear Frieda Roos-van Hessen – one of the few remaining Holocaust survivors. At 91, she spoke for an hour and a half about the atrocities she experienced; the betrayals by friends and neighbors, the murder of her family members, and the 4 years of living in fear of being caught and killed. It was an amazing story. Back in class, I asked the students to share their thoughts. “Ethics is the study of making right and wrong choices,” I prodded, thinking this would be a slow pitch. “How might Frieda’s story help us reflect on those who made the ‘wrong’ choices?” One student said, ‘It’s real sad, but there were just too many people who thought the Jews should be killed. That’s just how it goes.’ Thinking this was merely an under-developed opinion I asked what others thought. One after another they confirmed it; there were just too many people to do anything. “Just following orders?” I prodded. “Yeah” someone said. Now, with an obvious level of disappointed irritation in my voice, I said, “No one is going to say this was *wrong*?” Silence. “That’s the ethical cop-out,” I said. “If you can’t say rounding up 6 million people and killing them because of their religious belief, sexual orientation, physical or mental abilities, is wrong, then you are *not* an ethical person. You are a chicken. And the world doesn’t need any more chickens. The world needs more ethical people who are willing to stand up for what they believe in and make a difference. And hopefully that difference includes concern for the lives of other people.” I realized that what I was trying to say to them was, “I think you’re on the wrong bus.”

And I know it’s easy to get on the wrong bus and sometimes travel for miles. Sometimes our culture even encourages it. ‘Look out for number one.’ ‘It’s all about me.’ ‘Whatever.’ ‘Buy this; it will make you happy. And we sometimes can’t help but get on with everyone else. But it’s not the *idea* of getting to Detroit that gets you there, but it’s getting on the right bus that does. And it’s never too late to get off and switch if you happen to find yourself on the wrong bus.

If you’re on the bus of *anger*, you can get off. That’s a bus I still sometimes ride.

If you’re on the bus of *greed*, you can switch at the next station.

If you’re on the bus of *hurt*, pull the cord and have someone help you off.

Sometimes we need *others* to let us know we’re on the wrong bus. And sometimes we need others to help us get on the right bus.

Tonight, after we've cleared out, Narcotics Anonymous will meet downstairs. I can't think of a clearer example. There's a group of folks who somehow ended up on the wrong bus. None of them said, 'I'd like to be addicted to heroine when I grow up.' But somehow it happened. They got help and are now on the right bus. And I'd be willing to guess it was *someone else* who had to tell them they were on the wrong bus. And so they have banded together to help those who are still struggling find the right bus. They never set out for the dreadful places they landed. I'm sure they all had hopes and dreams of a good life. But somehow, for whatever number of reasons, they got on the wrong bus.

And sometimes we do get on the right bus. And sometimes we head towards the right destination. And I think about our church. Yesterday was a monumental turning point in the life of The Potter's House. As you may know, we're a new church. We haven't even been together two years. All we had in the early days was an odd vision of a different kind of faith community, a new kind of church. And one by one by one people caught that vision. And some of you here remember the early days. Being a new church, we've had to rely on outside funding from other UCC churches. And yesterday was the day on which these 20 other UCC churches would decide whether to continue to help support us, or not. I've always been the one to make these presentations. So this time, I asked a few of our people to help with my presentation because this isn't the kind of thing that comes naturally to me. We met a while back and talked about different ideas. So I was ready. And then, a few days ago, Beth and Andy, Sue and Julie, Connie and Nancie told me that *they* wanted to make the presentation. *They* wanted to tell our supporters about The Potter's House. "Sure thing," I said. "Go for it." And they wowed them. The unanimous vote brought us two more years of partial funding. What their presentation said to the other churches was, 'look at who we are, what we do, and how we do it; we're on the right bus.'" And the churches agreed. And their confidence and vote meant a great deal to us there. And it meant a great deal to me. And so even more than the extremely generous continued support, that presentation said to me, 'we're glad to be on this right bus.'" And then last night I had a dream. I don't remember the actual content of the dream, but as I woke up, right then in the middle of the night, I knew this was a dream of confirmation. And a peaceful feeling swept over me. My dream said to me, specifically in regards to letting them take the lead, "you're on the right bus."

So tonight I'm going to ask you to do two things. I want you to ask yourself what bus you're on. And answer honestly. If you're on a bus that's not taking you where you want to go in life, let's get you off. Let's help you find a different or better route. That's part of what a faith community can do. I think that being on the wrong bus - and knowing it - is one of life's greatest heartbreaks. I've known people who wanted to be teachers but were talked out of it because there's no money in it. I've known people in abusive relationships who were encouraged to stay and try to work it out - and they stayed in that abusive relationship. Being on the wrong bus will never get you to where you want to go.

“Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able.” Jesus knows there's a sacrifice that comes with this. Because to get off the wrong bus you have to say, 'I'm willing to pay the price, to make this work, to try to walk that narrow road, to do what I need to do in order to be what I need to be. But getting off the wrong bus is one of the best things you can do.

And the second thing I'd like to ask is this, 'Are you on board with The Potter's House?' Are you already on board and ready for the long journey? Are you hesitating at the door, unsure of whether to board or not? Are you just getting to the station? If you are already on board, I want to say thank you. We wouldn't have made it this far without you, and we're glad to have you along for the rest of the journey. And if you are standing at the door, wondering or hesitating, I want to extend an invitation to you to ride with us. I'm not going to promise you you'll get rich, or that the ride will always be smooth, or that there won't be times when we might have to get out and push. But I can promise you it will never be boring and I can promise you there's no better group of people to ride with. And to those who might just be arriving at the station I would like to extend my invitation to you as well. No matter who you are, and where you are on your journey, you're welcome to ride with us.

Now some churches have altar calls. Don't worry! Some churches have people come forward to light a candle, and some churches have membership cards you can fill out. And while those are all fine ways to signify one's commitment, they are not the commitment. The real commitment comes from your heart; to know and love and serve God more and more each day. And so in the silence, with heads bowed, I simply invite you to listen for that still small voice deep inside you, the voice of God. It might just be saying, "climb aboard." Thanks be to God.