

YOU CAN LEAD A HORSE TO WATER...

July 3, 2011

It's a true story! Dick had been the pastor of First Church for fifteen years. Now he was leaving that church, and he needed to write his final, farewell article for the church newsletter. So he sat at his typewriter, struggling to capture the substance and the essence of fifteen years of ministry. Here's what he wrote:

A minister's work is to serve God's people, but he's not the doormat you wipe your feet on!

Did you ever feel this way? Did you ever feel taken for granted...unappreciated...ignored... taken advantage of...even a failure? Did you feel so overwhelmed by such resentment that your anger came spewing out? And did you ever blame it on the people with whom you work and serve? I did...and so did Jesus!

As we met Jesus today, He was a miserable, frustrated failure. He did most of the mighty works of His ministry in three cities of Israel in Galilee...in the cities of Chorazin, and Bethsaida, and Capernaum. But the people in these cities ignored Him. They rejected Him. They refused His ministry. Listen to Jesus:

We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed and you did not mourn.

These cities found a reason to reject all of the ones that God sent to them. Listen to Jesus again:

For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'

In other words, Jesus was saying, 'You're damned if you do...and you're damned if you don't!' So Jesus pronounced His judgment on these cities and their people:

"Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades. For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom than for you."

Yet, Jesus' failure in these cities was nothing next to what was about to happen to Him in Jerusalem! On Palm Sunday, Jesus was welcomed into that city with incredible fanfare and flourish. But, in just five short days, all of that praise became condemnation and crucifixion. Why didn't these people listen? Why didn't they pay attention? Why didn't they take Jesus' ministry to heart?

I think the answer is the most precious...and the most problematic...and perhaps even the most pernicious gift that God gives us...the gift of freedom. This weekend, we celebrate that gift. It's

the gift that forged the vision of our republic. It's the gift that's enshrined in the most sacred texts of our nation. It's the gift that so many Americans have fought for and died for. It's the precious gift of liberty. In the words of the Declaration of Independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

In the United States of America, we are not subjected to the tyranny of a despot. We choose our own destiny. But, the back side of our liberty is that we sometimes choose our own destruction.

Freedom is so very difficult for us because of our nature...because of a war that rages deep within us. That war is the struggle between liberty and license. Liberty is the great ideal of freedom that fills us with significance as we engage others. It is the greatness of contributing to the good of the commonwealth. But license is the small selfishness of indulgence in the isolation of our own desires. It is greed that does not build up the commonwealth, but plunders it. The Apostle Paul calls this warfare between liberty and license a war between spirit and flesh. Listen:

For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin.

Which one will win in us? Will it be liberty, or license? Will it be spirit, or flesh? This is the struggle...this is the challenge...this is the seduction...and this is the burden of freedom. And today, St. Matthew gives us a rare glimpse of Jesus...Jesus who is supremely frustrated by the gift of freedom...Jesus who gives in to the flesh of self-pity and victimhood.

How do we manage the gift of freedom? How do we manage the most precious, and problematic, and even pernicious gift that God gives us? Too often we do it with coercion. We use the threat of some form of punishment or pain to persuade, or to manipulate, or even to wound the flesh. Maybe that's why we're so caught up in a gun-toting craze today in our society. Maybe that's why we're so supportive of capital punishment. And, this past week, what an amazingly shocking illustration our own Wisconsin Supreme Court has given us of our passion for coercion.

For most of its life, the church has used coercion to control its people...the biggest threat of all...the threat of eternal punishment...the threat of Hell. How many people have supported the church and participated in it out of fear instead of faith...and out of obligation instead of love?

Our contemporary society holds a very dim view of corporeal punishment. But corporeal punishment was once a very popular punishment for children – both at home and at school. You know the old cliché:

Spare the rod and spoil the child.

Now I know what corporeal punishment is like from firsthand experience...and maybe some of you do, too! And some of us have heard the line that a parent has often spoken to a child who is about to receive a spanking:

This is going to hurt me more than it is you.

Right!

Lee Whiston taught Old Testament at my seminary. He was one of my favorite professors...and one of the most wise. Once when he was a child, he committed a grievous offense. His father, who was a minister, told Lee that he must be punished. So he turned Lee over his knee, and Lee waited for the first blow to be administered. And he waited. And he waited. And he waited. Finally, Lee turned his head to look up at his father. And what he saw were tears streaming down his father's face.

So it is with God...so it is with Jesus. After itching to see those hard-hearted, and stiff-necked, and closed-minded ingrates in Chorazin, and Bethsaida and Capernaum punished, Jesus abandoned coercion and revenge for invitation and redemption. Listen:

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Here's the amazing truth of God's love: we receive true liberty when we answer Jesus' invitation. We experience real freedom when we commit ourselves to the wisdom of Jesus' way. We are truly emancipated...we are truly set free...when we enslave ourselves to God's work. In his little book, *A Treatise on Christian Liberty*, Martin Luther writes:

***A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.
A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.***

Now these two statements seem contradictory and mutually exclusive. But, in the glory of our faith, they are parallel and necessary partners:

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

A yoke and a burden: in our popular understanding of freedom, yokes and burdens simply don't belong. Yet being yoked to Christ as His partner and co-laborer in God's work is the deep meaning, and experience, and expression of freedom. In the words of the prophet Zechariah, the easy yoke and the light burden of Jesus is even the way of peace. Listen:

He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations...

The Messiah will destroy the engines of war: not only the engines of war of the enemy, but the engines of war of God's people. After all, Ephraim and Jerusalem are the homeland! And the Messiah will do this so that God's people no longer live by the intimidation of coercion and violence but, instead, they shall live by the persuasion of invitation alone. You see, God has given up on coercion. Forever in its place God offers us an invitation:

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Over and over again, God issues the invitation. Ever and always, the invitation is issued to all of God's people. So this invitation is God's hope for us...and in this hope we find our true liberty when we become its prisoners. You see, prisoners of hope never embrace any ideal less than liberty, and they never employ any strategy other than invitation.

So, friends, God calls us to let go of coercion. Give it up! Don't threaten with hell...because God doesn't. Hell, you see, is not God's foreboding fate for us for tomorrow because of what we do or don't do today. Hell is our choice to separate ourselves from God today by ignoring the invitation. So the antidote for our separation from God...the gateway to communion with God and all God's children is this:

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Jesus was a failure in Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum. And the hard truth is that He is a still a failure in many places and people. Don't let Him be a failure in you...or in this church!

There's an old cliché that goes like this:

You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink.

Our work is to keep leading the horse to water...to keep issuing the invitation in the hope that, one day, all of God's people will drink of the water of life which is everlasting love....that, one day, all of God's people will embrace the true meaning of liberty when they answer the invitation:

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

Amen.

Charles E. Mize
 Union Congregational United Church of Christ
 Green Bay, Wisconsin
 July 3, 2011