

Choosing Collaboration...Again

Joshua 5:9-12
2 Corinthians 5:16-21
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32
Psalm 32

Thanks to King David, this morning I get to talk about horses!!! Today I want to tell you a story about a horse named Shiloh. She was donated to my camp and needed to be moved immediately. Her owners had sold the foal at her side, but the baby wouldn't be taken until she was weaned, 6 months later. Shiloh was feral; couldn't be touched, definitely could not be caught. My job was to train her so she could be ridden by campers, but when she arrived, she wouldn't even let anyone near her.

Today's Psalm warns us, in our relationships with God, to not be like the horse who must be bound by force. Rather, God wants to be experienced as our hiding place, the safe place we run when the world feels threatening. God promises to gently guide us, if we will just stay near, trust, and permit ourselves to be led.

Allow me to grossly oversimplify horse training techniques to make a point. There are two very different approaches used for training horses. For the record, I am not here to weigh the merits of horsemanship methods, as I have used both, and this illustration uses extreme versions without nuance. One approach is to dominate the horse using force, making it comply. Humans can often outsmart, stubborn, or even abuse horses, into compliance. The other approach relies on gaining the horse's trust; it's more collaborative.

This second method is what I used with Shiloh. I put her and the foal in a round pen and stood in the middle. At first, my being in that shared space was so upsetting to her that she would run away even when I stood still. Eventually, she learned that I was not scary, and she would only run when I'd do something to spook her. Horses run when they are scared, but smart horses learn they can rest when they come stand right next to the trainer. At the time, I was pregnant with my first daughter, which made me extra aware and

careful to protect the fragile foal beside her. I never let them run too hard or put either at risk. As her confidence in me grew, she learned that standing next to me was the safest place to be. I might throw a saddle on her back, but after some consideration, she realized the saddle didn't hurt, and it was far better than running endlessly in circles. I taught her to tolerate my presence, my movements, and eventually to accept a saddle and even let me ride her. Soon she began approaching me when she was free out in the pasture, and she would follow me around, no lead rope required. And I never even gave her treats. When she believed I was a threat, she would run away. Once she knew I was safe, she started running to me.

The parable Jesus tells is of two sons. The father of these sons did not confine either one. The first one used his freedom to run away. He wanted to feel independent of his father, even though it was his father's wealth he used to express his independent freedom. When that money ran out, and he felt the pain caused by his distance from the father, he came back. His father did not drag him home, he came because he knew he it was the one place he would be safe and have his needs met. The other son stayed with his father, but he did so under the compulsion he felt. He said he felt bound like a slave, never enjoying the riches of alliance with his father, never feeling the freedom or bounty associated with his father's house. He stayed, but his feeling of imprisonment left him feeling embittered.

I talk about horse training alongside this parable because, with Shiloh, I never forced her to come to me or to obey my will. I gave her the freedom she wanted to run away as long and as often as she wanted. And she learned to come back quicker and quicker; eventually she stopped running away altogether. God doesn't force our obedience either. God offers us partnership. Shiloh became one of the camp's best horses. She was so much fun to ride because she was so willing to be a partner, participating in the adventures we took together as a fellow teammate.

Horses are prey animals. It isn't natural for them to accept a predator on their back. For a horse to be rideable, he has to take on a new identity. We call rideable horses "broke", which indicates their will has been broken, they now trust a predator to guide them and keep them safe. They are no longer merely prey animals. "Broke" horses are now in collaboration with predators to accomplish something neither can do alone. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul calls Christians a "new creation", our old identity has passed away. Rather than living for ourselves, he calls us ambassadors for Christ. Ambassadors are people who work for their sovereign, recognizing that their prosperity is wrapped up in the prosperity of their country, and so they live for something beyond just themselves. They become partners and active participants in priorities beyond merely their own.

Taking on a new identity is something we can all identify with; it's something we all do repeatedly throughout the course of our lives. Today's reading from Joshua shows the Hebrew people, slaves, who had escaped from 400 years of slavery in Egypt and then wandered in the wilderness for forty years, as exiles, finally entering the Promised Land. They had eaten manna, bread from heaven, for forty years because they could not cultivate their own crops as they wandered through the sandy heat of the desert. In this story, they ate their first meal off the produce of the Promised Land. The fulfillment of that promise caused the provision of manna to cease. They no longer needed it. Their identity had changed. They were no longer slaves. They were no longer nomads. They were God's children, and heirs of the promise.

That manna had been a blessing. It had proven God's care and provision for them. It had also acted as a "bit and bridle" tying them to God. When God gave the people the Promised Land that had been cultivated by others, rich, and fertile, God was offering them true freedom. They were no longer slaves in Egypt. They were no longer tied to God's manna for daily sustenance. They would go on to use that freedom to repeatedly run away from God and repeatedly be drawn back by the love and grace of God's mercy.

You see, when Paul calls us ambassadors, he says the message we are entrusted with is the message of reconciliation. It's the message that humans behave towards God the same way that untrained horses behave towards humans, we run away. And God does not hold that against us. In the Greek, when this says Christ is appealing to us to "be reconciled to God", it literally means to keep being reconciled to God, in an ongoing way. Paul and Jesus both knew we would not run away one time. We will do it over and over and over again. And Paul tells us to come back over and over and over again.

God loves us. God wants to be our hiding place. God wants to turn us all into new creations, to make us ambassadors who work alongside Jesus in the eternal work of the Kingdom of God. To choose that partnership, to stop running away and to start running with God, is a brave act of faith and it is a choice we have to make again and again.

Immediately before Jesus tells today's parable, the reason he tells it, is because the folks around him were complaining about those he was eating with. They said, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." Friends, that is us. We are the wild, unbroke horses, who Jesus wanted to sit and eat with, the prodigals who run away and live scandalous lives before crawling back...again and again. And that is the reason we have become ambassadors, proclaiming the message of reconciliation; the miracle of God's shocking and longsuffering love.

May we be willing to claim our new identity as partners and ambassadors with Christ, humbly returning as often as we run away, and as Jesus welcomes us, may we so willingly, so repeatedly, so warmly welcome others.