

## **An Ear that is Trained: Knowing and Doing God's Will**

Deuteronomy 30:9-14

Psalms 25:1-9

Colossians 1:1-14

Luke 10:25-37

This morning, I would like to talk with you about horses' ears. (I'm sorry, but I am who I am, and you are stuck putting up with me.) Horses' ears are one of their coolest features. As prey animals, horses are constantly on the alert for danger because they don't have fangs or claws to protect themselves. If they are threatened, they run. Their senses are heightened to detect danger, and their ears are one way they do this. Their ears attach to their head on swivels, and they are shaped like a cup that catches sounds from great distances. They can even isolate and turn their ears independent of one another to concentrate on two different things at once. If they get extremely excited about something like food or afraid of something like a predator, they raise their head and point both ears to capture all the information they can. And, if they become especially angry about something, no longer caring about protecting themselves, they will flatten their ears back against their head to signal their displeasure.

When training a prey animal like a horse to trust a predator like a human, the ears can be a helpful way of understanding what is going on inside the horse's mind. I once trained a terrified mustang named Zeb who had never been touched by a human. Eventually I gained his trust, and he signaled that by relaxing and putting his head down. But the clearest signal was he consistently kept one ear pointed in my direction. Horse trainers know that a horse with one ear fixed on them is demonstrating both trust and respect. That ear signals the horse's attention and his willingness to both listen to and follow the trainer's guidance. If the horse's attention is elsewhere because of fear, disrespect, or disinterest, it's impossible to have a partnership. The same is also true in human relationships with God.

The parable of The Good Samaritan begins with a lawyer's question. "What must I do to inherit eternal **life**?" The word he uses for "life" is Zoe, a noun. It is a fixed construct. The lawyer wants to know how he can secure a place in a heavenly realm. Jesus turns the conversation around on him, by asking the lawyer questions of his own. Then Jesus pronounces **love** as the answer, saying love your neighbor, "and you will **live**". But rather than zoe, the fixed noun of an otherworldly existence beyond this one, Jesus responds with the verb zao (zo). It is as if the lawyer is looking for a guarantee of a life he can secure for the future and Jesus responds by saying that **to love is to live**, loving is the essence of life itself and living a life of active love is indeed an eternal act. The lawyer, like us, wants the assurance of living in the Messianic Kingdom. Well Jesus is the Messiah and his kingdom is love. One day it will be perfected, but it exists now, to the degree that we are willing to create it by our active choices to live and love beyond the boundary lines humans create.

To illustrate his point, Jesus tells a parable that we are all familiar with but let me highlight some context to help us understand it the way the original listeners would have. First, the victim in our story is simply called "a man". He was given no status, no tribe, nothing defining at all. He didn't belong to anyone, and no one listening could identify allegiance or antagonism towards him. He is everyman. He is me and he is you. But Jesus immediately specifies that this person was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho. While that means nothing to most of us, it meant a great deal to them. Jerusalem was the holy city, representative of godliness and virtue. Jericho, on the other hand, had a tainted reputation in Biblical literature. It was associated with moral compromise and spiritual corruption. Not only that, but the road was 17 miles downhill through rocky desert terrain, hemmed in by narrow passes and rocky cliffs. This roadway was known to them as the Way of Blood because of its reputation for violence and lurking predatory thieves. The honorable, upright, religious crowd would rarely travel that way and they certainly would not do it alone. Those listening to this story may not know who this traveler belonged to, but his

route solidified his character in their minds. The fact that the priest and Levite were also traveling this degenerate path ought to make listeners question their own assumptions of superiority.

When asked, the lawyer concedes that the hated outcast, the Samaritan, was the virtuous character in the story. But the lawyer's generosity does not extend to the victim. When asked who the neighbor of the victim was, the lawyer specifies that it was the "one who showed mercy". The definition of mercy is compassion, but it literally means to not get what one deserves. This victim, this everyman, had done nothing worthy of the abuse he received. His suffering was unjust. And yet, this lawyer indicates his belief that a person going down that road to that place deserved whatever he got.

Ultimately his harsh judgment only made Jesus' point that much more dramatic, but the truth is that the lawyer's prejudice was unfounded. And even so, regardless of how desperate a sinner this anonymous man may have been, it was the unexpected willingness of a stranger to sacrifice his own time and money to care for him that Jesus said illustrated eternal life. God's grace always extends beyond human judgments.

It is easy for us who have heard this story so many times to believe that we have greater clarity and kinder intentions in our goodwill for humanity. But the unfortunate truth is that most of us have difficulty with the idea of showing sacrificial love towards particular groups of people. It is human nature to imagine our own moral superiority while taking offense at the values, views, and actions of those with whom we disagree. And we can be so entirely certain of our alignment with God's will that we fail to even ask God. The lawyer was so sure he knew the victim was morally inferior that he assumed he deserved his abuse. Jesus didn't bother correcting him because the point is to love regardless. It's just that our prejudices can make it so much harder for us to love.

As humans it is natural for us to enshrine our own position as moral and spiritual law. That is what the lawyer did. But, if we're not careful, those pre-formed conclusions can get in

the way of us truly hearing the voice of God. Like an angry horse with ears pinned back, unable to hear from his anger or a wild horse to believing all predators are unsafe, running in fear. A trained horse learns to wait, and keep an ear always pointing at his trainer, looking for that person to indicate how he should respond before bolting from sheer instinct.

The Scriptures testify to our need for ongoing direction from God. Moses indicated that the commands of Scripture were written for the prosperity of the Israelites. But that, he said security would come through an ongoing pattern of turning to the Lord with their whole heart and soul. Their hope wasn't in cold obedience to the Law, but in following God's heart. Following God requires repeatedly turning to God. It is a reorientation of focus. Ultimately, Moses expected that they would love the Scripture so deeply that they would internalize it and be changed by it, but their future prosperity relied on their willingness to be moved by active their relationship with God. Likewise, Colossians tells us Paul's community prayed that the people of Colossae would be filled with the knowledge of God's will and that knowledge would shape their lives in a living way. And the Psalmist too asks God to make the way known, to lead, and to guide him into paths of life and love. No doubt all of these examples are of people who believed they knew what morality looked like, how love should behave. And yet, they had the wisdom to know they needed to keep an ear trained on God to know how to live out God's love. Today's collect asks that we "may know and understand what things we ought to do". Our beliefs and views are not sufficient when separated from the Living Word of God that directs our hearts to action. Eternal Life is living God's love in unexpected places, often towards people our hearts would naturally overlook or disdain.

May we be a people who walk in the way of eternal life, always keeping an ear pointed to God, eager to learn afresh in each new encounter how best to love.