

Sermon

Of Bits & Bridles

A Sermon for Cary Presbyterian Church

Sunday, September 12, 2021

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Prayer for Illumination:

I do not presume to know or speak the “word of the Lord,” by my own wisdom or merit. We all know well the warning of James that not many should be teachers for we all make many mistakes. Yet we *do* trust that your word can be found among the words read and proclaimed — it is a mystery how that can be.

So help us hear today the word you would declare. Give us ears to receive, hearts to hold, and lives to nurture the word which you will implant if only we can make the soil of our souls ready. You say:

**“I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.”**

So be to us Lord, a constant companion, a counselor in perplexity, and our guide in the way everlasting. Amen.

James 3:1 Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. 2 For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. 3 If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. 4 Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong

winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. 5 So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! 6 And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. 7 For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, 8 but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. 9 With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. 10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. 11 Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? 12 Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

Psa. 32:0 Of David. A Maskil.

1 Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.

2 Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

*Psa. 32:3 While I kept silence, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.*

4 For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. *Selah*

*Psa. 32:5 Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;*

*I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,"
and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Selah*

*Psa. 32:6 Therefore let all who are faithful
offer prayer to you;*

*at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters
shall not reach them.*

7 *You are a hiding place for me;
 you preserve me from trouble;
 you surround me with glad cries of deliverance. Selah*

*Psa. 32:8 I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;
 I will counsel you with my eye upon you.*

9 *Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding,
 whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle,
 else it will not stay near you.*

*Psa. 32:10 Many are the torments of the wicked,
 but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD.*

11 *Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous,
 and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.*

- I. I wonder if you feel any guilt today?**
- A. Perhaps for something you did . . .
OR left undone . . .**
 - B. Perhaps for persistent attitudes you have which you *know* are not consistent with the heart of God . . . but which you cannot seem to shake . . .**
 - C. Maybe over an estranged relationship which you know you had some responsibility for creating . . .**
 - D. Or, perhaps like James, you know the pain of having said something that you know was wrong and those words spoken now haunt you . . .**
 - E. Notice that all these are failures of relationships**
 - 1. Failure to love others as ourselves.**
 - 2. Failure to love God first and most.**
 - 3. *All* relationships of significance require the more or less constant maintenance of**
 - † recognizing our faults,
 - † showing penitence and
 - † making a course-correction.
- II. It is a universally experienced part of life that we “transgress” and have to live in the mess we’ve made.**
- A. We *could* try to pretend we are good . . .**
 - 1. 1 John 1:8 If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.**
 - B. We *could* try to hide our transgressions . . .**
 - 1. How we all try to keep “plausible deniability.”**

“Where is there a person who does not with instinctive sureness find the spot where he can stand and defend

himself. . . for which he will fight with all the drive of his instinct of self-assertion?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer — *Life Together* p. 91

- 2. To pretend that our transgressions are not transgressions at all as Polonius suggests to Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*:**

*“With devotion's visage and pious action
we do sugar o'er the devil himself.”*

(Act III, Scene i, Lines 46-49)

C. Or failing that . . . we *could* try to hide ourselves . . .

1. Gen. 3:8 “They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.”

**III. The Psalmist knows about all of these tactics and more
But Concludes:**

**A. Happy are those who’s transgressions
are forgiven.**

**Those to whom the Lord inputs no
iniquity.**

And *in whom there is no spirit of deceit.*” Psa 32:1-2

**1. Psa. 130:3 “If you, O LORD, should mark
iniquities, Lord, who could stand?
4 But there is forgiveness with you,
so that you may be revered.”**

IV. The Psalmist then gives us a first-person case-study.

*Psa. 32:3 While I kept silence, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.*

4 *For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah*

Psa. 32:5 *Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,”*

and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

B. Long before Freud came along . . . the Psalmist knew that you have to say some things out loud.

“Kept Silence” versus “Acknowledged.”

**I wasted away
felt weight of guilt**

**you forgave
glad cries of
deliverance**

C. I acknowledged . . . you forgave.

- 1. No begging**
- 2. No negotiating**
- 3. No groveling**

I acknowledged . . . God forgave/restored.

V. Horses & Mules Bits & Bridles

Perhaps you are wondering what this all has to do with bridles and bits....

A. When I was a child we had 180 acre farm . . . an attempt by my father to avoid taxes I think . . .

- 1. We did raise goats, Angus beef cattle, and Simmental cattle too.**
- 2. Three horses as well, a gelding quarter-horse and two appaloosa mares.**

B. A horse can be fiercely defiant

C. A mule can be dull-witted and hard-headed.

VI. In verse 8 we are given a clue about God’s desires as the voice of the Lord responds to the Psalmist...

*Psa. 32:8 I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.*

*9 Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding,
whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle,
else it will not stay near you.*

A. This reminds me of something Jesus said to us too:

Matt. 11:28 “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 29 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. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

B. What God wants is an honest relationship of love and trust where we freely choose to be yoked and to be “students” in learning to live the life that really is life.

1. The key phrase in that is “freely choose.”

2. Love is the sort of relationship which *requires* freedom to choose . . . once coercion enters the relationship it becomes something else.

C. God — out of love for us — enters into this relationship vulnerable to the fact that we are free to choose whether we will be faithful and return God’s loving commitment.

D. A work-animal on a farm is coerced to do what is needed with bit and bridle.

E. This is *not* how God desires our relationship to work.

9 *Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding,
whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle,
else it will not stay near you.*

The alternative of a relationship where bit and bridle curb our tempers . . .

Is a relationship where we gladly accept God’s instructions, and follow in the ways of faithfulness because we freely choose the path.

VII. Many of the troubles of those who choose infidelity in relationship to God and others:

*Psa. 32:10 Many are the torments of the wicked,
but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD.
11 Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous,
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.*

- A. The Psalmist concludes with the observation that failure to act in love toward God & neighbor leads to self-inflicted torment — but *Hesed* “steadfast love” surrounds those to trust in God.**
- B. That “trust” finds expression in our concrete acts of fidelity to God and our neighbors.**
- C. Next week I will begin teaching the Book of the prophet Isaiah.**

† **Like all major prophets Isaiah is deeply influenced by the teaching at Sinai — Moses**

Deut. 30:15 See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. 16 If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I

am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. 17 But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, 18 I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. 19 I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, 20 loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Choosing life is choosing to commit in our relationship with God and to commit to neighborly acts day-by-day.

So let us *not*

*be like a horse or a mule, without understanding,
whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle,
else it will not stay near you.*

But rather . . . let us be the kind of disciples who freely accept the yoke of our Lord who wants to teach us about gentleness and humility, and steadfast tenacious love.