

Remember the Sign

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. William D. Peterson
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May 2, 2010

New Testament Lesson: John 13:34-35

³⁴ *A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.* ³⁵ *By this all men [and women] will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.*

The Sermon

A quick glance at the morning paper, or time spent even half-listening to the evening news, reveals the existence of incredible problems in our society and our world today.

Some of the problems are simply magnifications of the difficult issues that have plagued human societies since the beginning of time -- problems such as:

- ▶ coping with natural disasters;
- ▶ finding adequate sources of shelter, heat, physical and emotional safety;
- ▶ obtaining sufficient nourishment;
- ▶ affording adequate health care.

Other problems appear to relate to more recent phenomena, such as breakdowns in the family and – yes if we are being honest – in the church as well.

Would any of us deny that there is a phenomenal need to share the “Good news” of God’s love – not simply by word but also by deed – with a society that is *looking for love in all the wrong places*?

An unnamed author, in a piece called *The Paradox of Our Age*, nails our current realities.

We have taller buildings, but shorter tempers; wider freeways, but narrower viewpoints; we spend more, but have less; we buy more, but enjoy it less.

We have bigger houses and smaller families; more conveniences, but less time; we have more degrees, but less sense; more knowledge, but less judgment; more experts, but also more problems; more medicine, but less wellness.

We drink too much, smoke too much, spend too recklessly, laugh too little, drive too fast, get angry too quickly, stay up too late, get up too tired, read too seldom, watch TV too much, and discuss too seldom.

We have multiplied our possessions, but reduced our values. We talk too much, love too seldom and lie too often. We've learned how to make a living, but not a life; We've added years to life, not life to years.

We've been all the way to the moon and back, but have trouble crossing the street to meet the new neighbor.

We've conquered outer but not inner space; we've done larger things, but not better things; we've cleaned up the air, but polluted the soul; we've split the atom, but not our prejudice; we write more, but learn less; plan more, but accomplish less.

We've learned to rush, but not to wait; we have higher incomes; but lower morals; more food but less appeasement; more acquaintances, but fewer friends; more effort but less success.

We build more computers to hold more information, to produce more copies than ever, but have less communication; we've become long on quantity, but short on quality.

These are the times of fast foods and slow digestion; tall men, and short character; steep profits, and shallow relationships.

These are the times of world peace, but domestic warfare; more leisure and less fun; more kinds of food, but less nutrition.

These are days of two incomes, but more divorce; We have fancier houses, but broken homes.

These are days of quick trips, disposable diapers, throwaway morality, one-night stands, overweight bodies, and pills that do everything from cheer, to quiet, to kill.

It is a time when there is much in the show window and nothing in the stockroom.

The church of Jesus Christ also has its paradoxes and its problems.

How have denominations and institutions founded on the principle of Christ's inclusive love, become so exclusive?

Why have ministers and priests been permitted – far too often and over way too many years – to retain their ordained status when they've used those sacred callings, and those meant-to-be-sacred settings into chambers of horror, where they've violated the trust of innocent ones again and again?

We don't, however, have to focus on the dramatic or the seedy to realize that the Church must change if it is to remain relevant in today's world.

In the so-called *mainline* denominations and congregations I believe we might characterize at least some of these problems as being related to *supply and demand*.

By this I mean that at least some of the problems we face in churches such as CDA First Presbyterian, is that *our supply exceeds our demand*. Let me be more explicit:

- ▶ We have physical facilities that are aging, but that are still designed to meet the needs of more parishioners than are part of *the flock* in 2010;
- ▶ We have many more Sunday School classrooms than we have students, and willing and well-prepared teachers whose hearts break when they don't have children with whom to share their love of Christ;
- ▶ We have a lovely nursery facilities, but few – if any – infants;
- ▶ We have the wonderful Glory Be program, but its future is also dependent upon increased enrollment;

In other words, we are seriously and not mindlessly convinced that we stand ready to serve, but without seeming to have a demand for the services we would love to supply.

Concurrently, we are facing demands for human and financial voluntary services that outstrip our *physical* human capabilities, and our *fiscal* resources, as we observe the *graying* of our church, and the loss through death and other factors of major contributors.

In despite of such dilemmas, I remain convinced that we are not about to see the demise of the church of Jesus Christ in general, or of Coeur d'Alene First Presbyterian Church in particular.

Concurrently, however, it is also clear to me that while we continue to need to preach and teach the *old old story*, we need to learn to share it in new ways.

I say this partly because I don't believe that basic universal human needs have changed much if at all, but where and how people seek to meet those needs have changed dramatically over our lifetimes.

In the midst of this demand for change within a stable context, one of the sources that I continue studying to help me as an interim pastor prepare for all the changes that confront us, is not a text on church growth and development, but a book about horses -- or about *listening* to horses to be more precise.

The book bears the title *The Man Who Listens to Horses*, and it was recommended to me back when I was serving a church in Indiana, by the Synod of Lincoln Trails Executive Verne Sindlinger.

I love Verne's story of how he came to acquire this book. He says he went into a bookstore and asked the clerk, "Do you have the book about the man who **talks** to horses?" Very gently, the clerk said, "Do you mean the book about the man who **listens** to horses?"

We who are already in the church -- (any church) -- do a lot of *talking* about what is wrong with people, with society, and with our own spiritual health.

But do we do enough *listening* to those who aren't coming -- or to those who are -- for that matter?

- Do we listen to the youth and to the very elderly?
- Do we listen to the alienated and disaffected?
- Are we willing to be flexible *in our ways* without compromising the essential tenets of the Gospel?

The book mentioned previously as my resource is titled, *The Man Who Listens to Horses*, and it is the autobiography of Monty Roberts, a horse rancher from California. Roberts grew up around horses, and began riding almost before he could walk.

Horse breaking, horse training, horse care was part of his family's business, and young Monty loved most every part of it except the breaking part. You see, he had a tender heart, and he couldn't stand to watch the terror in the eyes of these previously wild and free

animals as his father -- using completely acceptable practices in horse circles -- *broke* the animals' spirits so they would cooperate with human wishes for the horses' performance. Even as a young boy who loved -- yet feared -- his father, Monty believed in his heart that there had to be a more humane way to gain the horses' trust.

As a young teen Monty began to find a way while participating in wild stallion roundups in Nevada. He would go before others came for the roundup, so he could spend hours unobtrusively watching the horses in their natural herd environments.

As he did so, he began to notice that young horses -- whose acting-out behavior led to their need for discipline -- were treated in very specific and consistent ways.

In other words, in the world of what we call "wild" horses, there were very specific behaviors -- some that *were* and some that *were not* acceptable if the horse population was to survive. Not surprisingly, the disciplinarians were always the mares, and each mare seemed to know when it was her turn to deal with a particularly rambunctious adolescent stallion or mare.

The adult stallions -- and especially the alpha stallion -- also had important roles in the life of the herd. The stallions roamed on the herd's outskirts, looking for external dangers, while the mares tended to the inside life of the herd. In other words, the stallions made certain *there was a herd to protect*, while the mares made certain that the quality of life within the herd *remained worth protecting*.

Through his observations, young Roberts learned that horses were not the predatory, dangerous animals his father and most of his fathers' peers believed them to be -- animals that needed to be beaten into submission.

Monty learned that contrary to popular belief, horses were not naturally **fight** animals; rather they were **flight** animals, prone to running at the first sign of danger.

But in addition to being *flight* animals, they were *herd-oriented*, **and that to be excluded from the herd was the worst form of punishment** in the mind of any of the horses.

The dynamic that most fascinated Roberts was the way the mares kept the acting-out young horses separated from the herd *until they showed their repentance* and *until they their desire* to be permitted back in.

I think there are enormous implications for raising human young here as well, don't you?

Roberts saw this separation/repentance/readmission cycle repeated so many times, that he came to understand this as a natural and instinctual language of the horse, a language he labeled *equus*.

Using this language, he perfected into a process that he called *starting* (as opposed to *breaking*) horses. Since the time of his early discoveries, he has been able to use *equus* thousands of times to get previously untrained and wild horses to voluntarily join up with him, and cooperate with him, in the same manner the mares did in the herds.

Typically he can do this within a half-hour, when traditional "breaking" methods sometimes took all day or days.

Further, through this process which he learned from the wild herds, Monty Roberts has never had to lay a hand or a rope on these horses out of anger or self-protection. He merely watched for the "signs" that the horse was tired of being excluded from his company, and he imitated the mare's responses in letting them be *with* him, rather than *out there* all alone.

Later in his life Monty also included deer and other wild animals in his repertoire of non-humans who would "join up" with him in cooperative enterprises. In fact deer became his favorite learning tool, for although their signs of wanting to join up were comparable to those of horses, they were much less forgiving of any breaking of the rules on his part.

If he tried to rush things, or if he broke their inbred code of courtship ethics, he would virtually have to start all over again and it would take even longer before any true union could be formed.

Roberts' methods of encouraging horses to "join up" with him, and to willingly and joyfully cooperate with human/horse endeavors, has received the ultimate test through a project funded by the British Broadcasting Company. They were so fascinated by his methods, that they filmed his process of getting a stallion in the wild to "join up" with him, then gave that stallion a year of human interaction before releasing it so it could rejoin its wild herd. After a set period with the wild herd, they filmed Monty setting up camp near the wild herd, and that fateful moment when the stallion, whom he'd named "Shy Boy," voluntarily left the herd, walked into Roberts' camp, and stood patiently by his side. To "Shy Boy," the rewards of horse/human interaction and devotion outweighed the rewards of being wild and free.

How Like the Church

My conviction is that there is much the church can learn from Mr. Roberts' lifelong passion of getting horses to "join up", and to be willing to be started rather than broken.

For one thing, we can learn once again that new ways of doing old activities are not readily accepted.

A tragic aspect of the book *The Man Who Listens to Horses*, is that Monty and his father never reconciled. Monty had believed that his father would be proud that he had learned better ways to communicate with horses and to train them.

By contrast, his father -- and many of his father's peers -- so rejected Monty's methods that Monty swore he would never have another human being present when he *started* a new horse.

Fortunately, his own maturing processes, and requests from significant horse lovers such as Queen Elizabeth of England, and other national and international figures involved in the realm of tending to horses, persuaded him to teach his methods to others.

Similarly, in the church -- any church -- there are many who stubbornly cling to the conviction that **the only ways to do church are the old ways** -- which happen to be

whatever ways church was done when they were at a critical developmental period in their lives.

We need to be careful to avoid blaming any one group for the church's problems. In addition to those who are resistant to change, there are others who believe that the church must use whatever ways the *market place* or *successful growing churches* use to attract new life.

Either extreme -- clinging to the old for the sake of comfort, or racing to the new in search of success -- are, in my opinion, recipes for disaster.

Rather, I believe the important variable is whether or not we can be sufficiently attentive to the kind of "herd" we are -- to know the kinds of folk who might want to learn and grow and benefit with and from us. They don't have to be our age. They don't have to be in our social or economic status. They don't have to look or dress like us. Certainly the young stallions that Monty Roberts observed weren't the age of the mares who were training them to be good herd members.

As is true in herds of all types, we also need to hold to the conviction that we will not let just any old thing go on in the church, in the hope that no one will be offended and that all will remain.

Notice that the young stallions and mares didn't get to dictate appropriate behavior for the herd, and that they needed to signal *their* repentance and *their* desire for being permitted back in, before join-up occurs either in the wild, or in Monty Roberts' training ring.

Have we so lost our convictions of right and wrong that formally authorized groups such as the Session can't agree as to what appropriate ranges of behavior are for young and old alike in this or in any church?

The Lesson of John

We are not left without guidelines, fellow believers and brothers and sisters in Christ. We are left with the model of Jesus.

Jesus declared in John 13:34-35, 34 *"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men [and women] will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*

In other words, if we want to be identified by the unchurched, by others who claim the name of Christ, as true followers of Jesus our sign must be what? -- our *love* for one another.

Like a young Monty Roberts, Jesus came teaching and preaching love and acceptance as the way of God, and like the young Monty Roberts, Jesus was rejected by those who felt that the old ways and the old rules worked just fine, thank you very much.

These nay-sayers were more than willing to believe that shame, guilt, punishment, and ritual were the answers to finding access to God, and a young upstart prophet such as Jesus needed to be pushed aside and even killed.

But to those to whom the old ways meant exclusion and humiliation, Jesus' words were like refreshing rains following a long drought. Do we not still have refreshing words and actions to share with those who have been left out of the traditional ways of *being* Presbyterian and *doing* church?

Jesus, and Paul and countless others, have shown us that God is love, and because God is love, God's followers are to be *primo lovers*. We won't hit the mark all the time but, the most excellent way to show that we have joined in with the mission of the church is to demonstrate love. That's the sign.

That's the sign, and that's the challenge. In a world hungry to love and meaningful relationships, we have good news. But just as Monty Roberts couldn't shout to the wild horses, "Hey, shape up, I'll make your lives more wonderful;" neither can we to the unchurched. We must show our love by the way we listen -- and respond -- to their signals.

May we be given the grace to be sensitive listeners and signal watchers.

Thanks be to God.