

Text: Psalm 32:10 *Do not be like horse or mule, which have no understanding; who must be fitted with bit and bridle, or else they will not stay near you.*

### **OF HORSES AND SIN**

Obviously, psalmist David never had a good quarter horse. Starting when I was ten and continuing for the next seven years, I spent the better part of every summer on a ranch in central Montana. I was given an older quarter horse named Nugget. Charlie, the owner of the ranch, said, within my hearing, that Nugget had more sense than any ten-year-old boy he had ever met. And I proved that was true. Nugget knew just how steep an incline we could take as I explored the fields and benches on the ranch. While Nugget had bit and bridle, one simply crossed the reins under his neck and slightly moved your hand to control his direction.

Neck reining was all that was needed. If you needed to get off the horse to open a gate, you just dropped the reins on the ground and the horse stayed put. The Psalmist was dealing with Old Testament horses; Nugget was clearly a New Testament horse.

All of us ride Old Testament horses some of the time, a few of us, and many churches, ride Old Testament horses full time. Old Testament horses are raised on the Ten Commandments with original sin mixed in. Seasoned with a helping of the Book of Job and the salt of Lot's wife, the poor horse is left with a guilty psyche yearning for certainty and authoritarian leadership. The horse lives in an environment bound by laws, rules and regulations. It has been beaten into submission believing, finally, that it really is inferior. When an opportunity presents itself, the horse will run off. After being caught it will be more convinced than ever of its natural inferiority. It will grovel for forgiveness of shortcomings, real and imagined. "Forgive me for those sins of which I am unaware."

With all of the rules comes appropriate punishment. Hell-fire and damnation sermons have their roots in the Old Testament. Hell, presided over by the Devil, himself only a little less powerful than God, provides a great scare tactic to get people to conform to the religious flavor of the month while partially removing personal responsibility for one's sins. Remember that wonderful comedian Flip Wilson and his "the Devil made me do it! "excuse for nefarious behavior? I have never needed a party external to myself to cause me to engage in sinful behavior. I am perfectly capable of causing all of the sin I am interested in doing.

That brings us to the question What is sin? For hypocritical me, sin is your behavior that I do not approve of. It likely involves breaking one or more of the ten commandments. Our religious culture generally links sin to individuals. We acknowledge, but don't really think about, institutional and cultural sin. It is so much more interesting to focus on sex, drugs and rock and roll than it is to consider systemic racism, income inequality and access to health care. Now, calm down, that is not a political statement, it is a religious statement. How you go about reducing racism, redistributing wealth and assuring access to health care, are political acts.

The full definition of sin is deceptively short. Sin is anything that removes us from the presence of God. The definition is deceptive because it looks short, but the reality is that many behaviors may remove us from God's presence. Furthermore, what removes me may not be what removes you from Her presence. This is one more reason for us to be cautious about passing judgement on people. We

don't really know the forces driving another person's behavior. Our best position as Christians is frequently to take a deep breath and leave the judgements to God.

What of Nugget, our New Testament horse? The first thing one notices is that control is gentle. No tugging at the reins or spurs or whip. A gentle force on the neck is all that is necessary. If we were actually working cattle, no human direction was usually necessary at all. You rarely tied or tethered the horse, it wanted to stay close to you. So it is with New Testament humans. The gentle force that is the gravity of the world is God's love. God's gift of evolution has given us brains to solve problems and explore our physical, mental and spiritual universes. Most of us, most of the time, want to remain close to God. Commandments, rules and regulations are not necessary. We know when we put space between ourselves and God. Ethical shortcuts in business, moral lapses in our personal lives, inattention to the needs of our neighbors – all of these separations from God are sins of which we are well aware.

My table mate on a cruise ship some years back was a retired company executive. During a conversation about corruption in the industry I made the usual professorial comment that perhaps some training in ethics was necessary. He responded with; they know what is the right thing to do. We have to stop rewarding them for making unethical decisions. Separating ourselves from God can be a more complex web of behavior than first meets the eye.

But, God's relationship to the universe is not complex. It is a relationship of love. When we ask God to forgive us our sins, we are really saying, forgive us for loving you, our neighbors and ourselves less than we should. Even from the cross, love rules: "Father forgive them for they know not what they do". Well, for the most part, we know what we do. We only need to make sure that when those reins are dropped, we stay close to our Maker. Amen