



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
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A Stephen Ministry Congregation
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Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost August 23, 2015

“Stiff-Necked & Obstinate”

(Exodus 32:7-14)

Rev. David K. Groth

“And the LORD said to Moses, ‘I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them’ (Ex. 32:9).

COLLECT: Almighty and merciful God, defend Your Church from all false teaching and error that Your faithful people may confess You to be the only true God and rejoice in Your good gifts of life and salvation; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

Have you ever ridden a horse that ignored you and did its own thing? I did. It was quite a few years ago at a state park in Kentucky. Stephanie was about five or six, so we rode together. I asked for a horse that I wouldn't feel guilty about sitting on. The guy looked me up and down, sized me up as if it were the State Fair and said, "I got a horse for you." He brought out this very large Belgian, a work-horse, mostly retired. His name was Maw. I don't know much about horses, but one thing I do know is that it really shouldn't take much to turn horse. Just a little pressure on the bit, to one side or another . . . that should suffice. What I have since learned is that if a horse constantly has lots of different riders on it yanking and pulling on the reins, the horse develops what is known as a hard mouth. They become desensitized to the pressure of the bit. They go where they want to go. In the language of our text, equine language, they become stiff-necked.

That was Maw. Maw went where Maw wanted to go. And normally, that works out just fine because Maw knew those trails better than any of his riders and just puts it on auto-pilot and does his job. But earlier that day there had been heavy rains making parts of the trails muddy. Maw didn't like mud, and was constantly looking for a dry detour. I made an early mistake by of Maw to go around one low spot full of mud. . . a harmless detour into the woods. Later on, however, there was trouble. Again, we came to a low spot. This time the forest on either side was much thicker, full of underbrush, impenetrable I thought. Maw didn't agree. Maw ignored my tugging at the bit and went straight into the thicket. I had Stephanie in one arm and the reins in the other, and there are sizable branches trying to scrub us

off of this horse. Maw didn't seem to mind. He just put his head down and went straight in, like a Sherman tank. I did manage to bring him to a full stop, in order to dismount and walk him back to the trail.

"I have seen these people" the Lord said to Moses, "and they are a stiff-necked people." God's people, collectively, are not going where he wants them to go. They are a disobedient, defiant, and rebellious people. They are ignoring his commands and doing their own thing, just like a stubborn old horse. And what do you do with a horse that doesn't go where you want it to go? Of what value is a horse that stiff-necked and obstinate?

"Now leave me alone" the Lord says to Moses, "so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them."

He and Moses are up there on Mt. Sinai. The people are down below, dancing, with all their heart and soul and strength around a golden bull.

Can you imagine? God had just delivered them out of Egypt with a series of incredible miracles. He led them out with a pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night. He divided the Red Sea before them and brought swift destruction to the pursuing Egyptians. God provided them with a miraculous supply of food and water in the desert. And what does he get in return? He gets the full throated clamor of his people cavorting and indulging themselves around a golden bull.

Unbelief is the rejection of gifts. The people were rejecting the greatest gift ever given them, the Lord their God who had called them to be his own. They should have been clinging to the Lord, if only out of gratitude. Instead they had rushed headlong into Baalism, a fertility cult common among the surrounding nations.

As it's been said, "It was a lot easier for God to take the Jews out of Egypt than it was for him to take Egypt out of the Jews." Proverbs 26 says, "Like a dog that returns to his vomit is a fool who repeats his folly." They are a stiff-necked lot. The horse is defying its rider, and the rider, the

Lord, has had it with this horse. “I have seen these people” the Lord said to Moses. (Notice the preposition. He doesn’t call them “my people”. He says, “these people”. He’s distancing himself from them.) I have seen these people and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone, Moses, so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them.”

Do you ever wonder if the Lord gets that angry at us? Do you ever wonder if he looks at us, our sin, our rebellion, our willful disobedience and says, “That’s it! I can no longer stomach these people.”?

We like to think of God as long-suffering, patient, not having any strong opinions about anything. We like to think God is tolerant of our wickedness. We like to think we can manipulate God and that he’ll play along while we indulge ourselves during the week knowing that we’ll be all pious and contrite on Sunday. We like to think God winks at sin or ignores it altogether. But on the top of Mt. Sinai, God is anything but tolerant and docile and domesticated. He’s ready to blow. The people down below, dancing around their idols, they have no idea how close they are to being consumed. In effect they are shooting sparks onto a barrel of gunpowder.

Moses intercedes. He prays the Lord would turn from his fierce anger. Notice, Moses makes no excuses for the people. Rather he appeals to God’s mercy and to God’s promises. “Lord” he says, “why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt.” Moses keeps using the preposition “your” as in “your people”. “And remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel and the promises you made to them, that you would make their descendents as numerous as the stars in the sky.” Don’t do this thing, Lord.

You know how the story goes. God relents and does not bring disaster on those people. Martin Luther noticed that wrath and anger and judgment are God’s alien work, whereas mercy and grace and love are his “proper work” because they best express his nature (See Is. 28:21). His

wrath, while very real, is a function of his holiness, and is somehow alien to his nature. That's important to know because some people have the opposite idea, that God is intrinsically wrathful, while making the occasional exception for some.

In any event, on top of Mt. Sinai God pents up his anger for another day, and has mercy on his people and resolves again and again to bring them into the Promised Land in spite of their sin. He does indeed punish sin, but it's his alien work.

That's important. Salvation happens outside of us. Salvation is caused by a change of God's attitude toward us, not a change of our attitude toward God. Innocence and righteousness doesn't come about because we somehow managed to change our sinful ways. It comes about because God puts it on us in Holy Baptism. Through Baptism, the Lord mercifully declares us his people, makes us his people, washes away our filth. The only good work that saves us is the good work that God has done. "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). So it's not as if we have to clean up our act before we can be God's people. Rather, we clean up our act because he has made us his people.

After all, the nature of man hasn't really changed that much. We're made of the same stuff as those ancient Israelites. Unbelief is still the rejection of gifts. And we do that all the time . . . when we neglect God's Word, giving it an occasional nod of our attention rather than letting it dwell within us richly (Col. 3:16). We reject gifts when we resent the extra time it takes for Holy Communion or when we think of Holy Baptism as just an empty ritual, a rite of passage, rather than the water of life. We reject gifts when it takes a disaster to get us to pray. We reject God's gifts when we survey our accumulation of riches and congratulate ourselves for our hard work and wisdom rather than giving thanks to God. I suspect there are times when the Lord feels like he's casting pearls before swine, because we have no idea of the treasures he would give us. And the dog still

returns to its vomit. That is, if you're like me, you end up confessing the same old sins week after week. Like an old, stubborn horse, we go where we want to go, and not where God is leading us. "Stiff-necked". Makes me think of me. Makes me think of you.

The good news here is that our God is also stiff-necked. He is more tenacious in grace than we are in rebellion. He is more mulish in mercy, more adamant in absolution, more dogged in grace than we are in sin. He is unbending when it comes to holding on to his promises. He simply cannot, will not forget them, though he promises to remember our sin no more. 2 Timothy 2 says, "When we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself." He is and always has been as hard-nosed and obstinate in grace as His people are in sin.

We get glimpses of this wonderful stubbornness throughout the Bible. In the book of Hosea, Hosea's wife, Gomer, is unfaithful to him. She gives herself over to other men. Yet the Lord tells Hosea, "take her back as your wife and love her, even as I the Lord your God love my people Israel."

This unyielding, stubborn grace is pervasive throughout Scripture. Look at the person and work of Jesus. When all his friends and disciples try to dissuade Jesus from going to Jerusalem, and stay away from that cross, Jesus puts them behind him, and resolutely turns toward Jerusalem. Yank and pull on the reins with all their might, no one could change his course. There was never a neck so stiff as our Savior's when he was heading toward Golgotha.

And that's where God finally vents his pent up anger. That's where the shower of sparks falls down onto that barrel of gunpowder. That's where God finally explodes with anger. There, on the cross, the white-hot wrath we've earned was directed at Jesus, the innocent, spotless Lamb of God. He had promised it way back in Genesis 3, and he tenaciously remained true to his promise.

Remember wrath is God's alien work but grace is intrinsic to his nature. That's why the author of Hebrews

writes, “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus . . . who for the joy set before him endured the cross” (12:2).

We have a God who is stubborn in his grace, and what a blessing that is. 99 out of a 100 sheep are all present and accounted for, and those aren’t bad numbers. But for the Good Shepherd, those numbers are totally unacceptable. You can’t have a lamb of your own flock, a sheep of your own pasture, wandering around aimless, lost and vulnerable. This shepherd is a hard-liner. He will not rest until he finds that one. He’s stubborn in that way.

Jesus taught that God is like an old woman who loses one coin, but she, being an obstinate old woman, ransacks her own house until she finds it. It’s simply not acceptable to be losing hard earned money.

You are the hard-earned child of God, bought at a price, not of gold or silver, but of the holy, innocent precious blood of Christ. He will not let you go.

What a comfort that is to us as individuals but also to us as parents, grandparents. We are not the only ones who love our children. Remember, in Holy Baptism, he’s adopted them as his own. He loves them too, more than we ever could, even when they’re trying to ignore his tug at the bit. For thousands of years now he’s been graciously dealing with that sort of obstinacy.

We are all stiff-necked, going where we want to go, doing what we want to do, ignoring his tug at the bit and on our hearts. But thanks be to God, the Lord makes our obstinacy look like child’s play. Amen.

