

“What Would Jesus Ride?”

B, Pentecost 16; Mark 7:24-37

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Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO

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I. SEEING A WOMAN ABOUT A HORSE

We’ve been on a hunt for a horse this week. For several weeks, actually.

In honor of Round Up Sunday, of course! And, in memory and honor our horse Juniper who died tragically and unexpectedly about a month ago.

Looking for a horse, in our case, is different than say, if we ran a dude ranch or church camp like many of our friends around here. AU, Elk Mountain Ranch, Trail West, Deer Valley Ranch....

Those folks are looking for a “member of the Team.” An addition to the pack, one of the essential staff. They seek promising new recruits who will provide great customer service to their clientele – a predictable perch for anyone from novice to expert riders, grandmas, teens, toddlers and everyone in between.

Poos Ranch, on the other hand, being a small operation, is searching (prayerfully) for a new member of the family – not that much different from the adoption of a child.

I’m not saying those big ranches don’t treat their horses like family –they really do—at least the ones I’ve been part of – but a family of 50 head is a whole ‘nother thing from a family of 2 horses, three dogs and two cats! (Oh, and several bunnies, birds and bucks in the yard.)

Satin Horse needs a sister. Clarke needs a safe, predictable traveling companion into his 7th decade (!) who is easy on the eyes, hips and both replaced ACL’s. For this may be his “last horse.” It reminds me a little of considering a house with only one story and no stairs as we move into our mid-to-later years!

Clarke wants a mare who is not “boring.” He prefers women, and he likes them a bit *uppity*—not too docile and definitely with some character!

Horse lovers look for an equine who will knock their socks off, but not knock their joints out or knock *them* on their kit and caboodle!

And so, we have searched, looked, listened, inquired, perused and pursued –several leads, suggestions and rescue sites. We’ve even looked at donkeys and mules, and considered whether a whole ‘nother line of equine might be a good fit for our family. (Giving the adorable and very loud braying of burros and the fact that we live in the city limits, we steered away from *that* idea for now.....maybe in retirement....)

Our search has not merely been practical, but a spiritual endeavor as well. We have *listened* to the animals we’ve met, nuzzled up against their sleek faces, looked into their eyes, watched their body language and read how they interacted with us. Much like St. Francis sought to connect with the animals soul-to-soul, we’ve sought a place of understanding, of communing, as we’ve discerned whether this was “the one” or if there was yet one to come.

We *might* have found one yesterday, but are still meeting some local girls; still pondering and wondering; waiting and watching. *Horse whispering*, if you will!

II. SEEING JESUS IN A NEW LIGHT

And speaking of wondering.....are you wondering what *any* of this has to do with today, with Roundup Sunday, and our worship service and gospel story? Well, of course we're going to talk about horses on Roundup Sunday –at least we are, if in a church where the pastor has a passion for equines, and qualifies as a genuine cowgirl –not just one day a year but *every* day!

Today is an important day in the life of the church. It's not "officially" on the liturgical calendar, this "Round Up" that many congregations do this time of year as we welcome back summer travelers, get into the groove of the school year, start up Fall programming and education and get ourselves singing in the Choir again.

But, official or not, it's a sacred time, and we are excited to gather on this special day, as these changes in season and focus are a vital part of our life together as the family of God. We look back at the summer and ahead to the Fall and yes (!) even to that time that starts with a W and hopefully has some of the white stuff in it.

Today we say goodbye to our Summer Song Series, but still welcome suggestions and favorites from your hearts and souls and memories that are meaningful.

And today, besides dressing like cowboys and cowgirls and enjoying a "winner winner chicken dinner," we begin a new journey with Jesus for the Fall. It's time to get "back to the Gospel" and delve-in to learning more in depth about the One we say we follow as Christians.

"WWJL" –Where Would Jesus Lead? is our theme for this Fall. We will delve into the gospel of Mark and other gospel stories and study Jesus' Way, teaching and example in light of our current culture, events and the swirling world around us.

And to that end, today, as we begin, we need to know –in order to lead us, and in honor of Round Up Sunday – what would

Jesus *ride*? WWJR?! (Sorry, I didn't think to order us all little wristbands for today –that would have been fun!)

What would Jesus ride?

I know, I know, in the gospel stories he's mostly doing a LOT of walking! But, Jesus as the one showing us the way to live, love and lead is also with us *now* as our model, on our journey – not just someone who lived back in the day and traversed those hot and dusty roads of Palestine.

What might he ride, if given the chance? In addition to that spunky little foal of a donkey on that fateful Palm Sunday trek into Jerusalem, of course!

What traits, trends and tendencies would Jesus look for as he rides and guides us? What kind of a road or trail would he ride down, and lead us to follow him on?

III. SEEING A WOMAN IN PAIN IN A NEW LIGHT

Today's scripture stories shed quite a bit of light on that question. They give us a glimpse into Jesus' character traits and what he looks for, understands and appreciates in others. It *also* gives us a glimpse that Jesus can *change his mind* sometimes, be stretched in his perspective, grow in his own understanding.

Hear this first story again in contemporary language and picture a woman from a neighboring country and different religious background in our times, finding Jesus and having a little go: (notice also that Jesus was *hoping* to get *away* from the pesky crowds for a change; to hide out a bit. He might not have been on his A –game!)

Mark 7:24-37 The Message (MSG)

²⁴⁻²⁶ From there Jesus set out for the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house there where he didn't think he would be found, but he couldn't escape notice. He was barely inside when a woman who had a disturbed daughter heard where he was. She came and knelt at his feet, begging for help. The woman was Greek, Syro-Phoenician by birth. She asked him to cure her daughter.

²⁷ He said, "Stand in line and take your turn. The children get fed first. If there's any left over, the dogs get it."

²⁸ She said, "Of course, Master. But don't dogs under the table get scraps dropped by the children?"

²⁹⁻³⁰ Jesus was impressed. "You're right! On your way! Your daughter is no longer disturbed. The demonic affliction is gone." She went home and found her daughter relaxed on the bed, the torment gone for good.

This is a funky little story! Like so many of Jesus' encounters and dialogues, it has puzzled scholars for centuries. If we can understand just a few insights from it, we'll be doing well.

Kate Matthews reminds us that "Just before Jesus leaves on this little break from the crowds, he has shocked the religious

authorities by declaring all foods clean and by focusing instead on what lives in our hearts."

So, that's a key piece. Think about "what's behind the news." What had Jesus been doing right before this? What message was being proven out or punctuated? He was challenging the long-held rules and regulations. What's this nonsense about some *foods* are good and some are bad? What matters is what's in the heart—enough of your "dietary quibbling."

And then, to the heart of the matter in this exchange with the Syro-Phoenician woman. Huey continues: "Now, whether he wants to or not, he encounters a tenacious, determined mother in search of healing for her little girl, a woman who will *not* be turned away from the table of God's grace, even if all she gets is the crumbs that fell to the floor.

"She uses her wits in a culture that values riddles for figuring things out, and she wins both the argument and the healing she has requested of this teacher from another religion and another land. Borders are crossed, hearts are opened, and so is the Christian mission, as Gentiles (and women) embrace the good news of the gospel.

"Just as Jesus declared all foods clean, then, he declares all people "clean," acceptable, included at the table.

III. WHAT WOULD JESUS RIDE?

Jesus shows and tells us a lot in this brief, curious interchange. About himself and his thought patterns, about his reactions when challenged, about his love of spunk and sparring, about his challenge to the status quo and how a "mantra of the times" might be turned on its head.

"Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." That would be like

our modern day phrases: “Not in my back yard!” Let’s feed our own family first! Take care of our own!”

Would Jesus just keep repeating those mantras, or was he putting it out there from his culture for the woman to challenge? Would Jesus ride a boring horse? Would he tow the party line, just follow the strictures of the times, like a nose-to-butt trail horse, ruled *safe* for kids and grandmas, novices and hotshots alike?

Or, would he ride one with *spirit*? One that might *challenge* him, those around him and the status quo? Maybe one that had not been ridden much.

What about one with *issues*?!

One horse we met this week had a real issue about the rear girth. We’d never seen anything like it or heard of others with this hangup. But boy, if you even *thought* about butting that second strap under her belly, she turned rodeo in a heartbeat!

Her reaction reminded me of that “Don’t Fence Me In” song! Don’t bind me, tie me down, hem me in. I’ll come out kicking and screaming!

That mare was feeling hemmed in, trapped, too-controlled by that rear girth, and she let us know it! UP came the front hooves! UP came the back end in a buck!

I wonder if Jesus ever felt like that? He had a lot of times when people tried to put straps on him, to hem him in behind and before, attach things to him—backside and front.

He must have gotten tired of people putting him in a box (well—at least trying!) Putting a binding on him and his words and actions and claiming to know what they meant. Claiming to speak for him, or for God the Creator of us all.

Was he buddy sour? Barn sour? Only concerned about *his* herd and home?

And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. (John 10:16)

The woman was a foreigner. Of a different race. A stranger. What right did *she* have to seek him out? To ask for healing? Would her daughter take healing and care *away* from his tribe? Hurt *their* chances?

Would Jesus be a *rough* cowboy, bossing cows around and not concerned with their welfare?

Or, a good cowboy, like a Good shepherd – calling the sheep by name, gathering them in, searching for the one lost babe.

Would he let his herd roam on the open range? No fences, pens, no walls; but guides and cattle guards to keep them (us) safe.

IV. WHAT TIDE WOULD JESUS RIDE?

What would Jesus ride? What tides of the times would he get on board with and which ones would he buck?

Would Jesus ride the tide that says: “We’re too divided – we’ll never come together again as a people? As a nation or even a global community? We just get more and more conflicted and can’t find common ground.”

--the church will never see its glory days again

--If we are too *open* to other religions and cultures, we will lose our own sense of belief and who we are.

--If too many people come here from other places, they will take jobs and resources away from my kids.

--Too much damage has been to the earth and there’s no repairing or restoring that will help?

OR, would he ride the tide and answer the woman: “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof...” “I have come that you *all* may have *life* and have it *abundantly!*”

“God so loved the WHOLE world.

And, even more: would he lay down his life—climb down off that horse and up onto a cross – for *every* one, every soul, every sheep – whether lost or found?

Would Jesus, like the Good Shepherd, leave the 99 and go search for the *one* –whether that one was you or me, or looked or talked or worshipped like us?

Would Jesus open the sheepfold to *every* sheep, red and yellow, black and white, branded, tagged or unlabeled? Would his welcome embrace *all* –would the circle be drawn wide, as the woman challenged him to do – “Draw that circle wider, Jesus!” Heal *my* daughter, I beg you! Don’t worry whether she’s a Gentile, or worthy, or from another land. She’s a hurting little girl, disturbed – her life destroyed by evil spirits.”

Would Jesus *expand* his ideas of what’s right and who’s in, when challenged. Would *we*?

Would Jesus remind us again and again – “whenever you do it to the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you do it to me.”

Would Jesus say: “I don’t understand you, with your different orientations, gender expressions, ways of life, ways of dressing and ways of worship, and because I don’t ‘get it’ it must not be what God intended. It’s not “normal”, so I don’t have to understand. It’s outside my ken. I’ll just stay inside my little comfort circle and not risk trying to reach out and expand my understanding.

Or, would Jesus be open to listening to different perspectives; understanding another’s journey and life experience? To hearing the desperate cries of a concerned mother and her need for him to open his eyes, ears, and heart to her and her culture? And most especially her daughter, in order to bring healing to her family.

Would Jesus ride the tide that says it’s more controversial to protest racial injustice and prejudice by a taking a knee (that looks a lot like bowing in prayer!) than continuing to live with school shootings and ongoing gun violence that drop kids to their knees and worse almost every day? How would Jesus look at those issues that consume us?

What bandwagon would Jesus get on?

What should *we* ride? Each one of us? What tide of the times are we on board with? In the saddle, and moving full-speed ahead? What tides or trail should we be bucking, challenging, seeking new perspectives on?

Is the trail a good one, we must ask. Full of light and love, harmony, compassion, mercy and justice? Is it a trail on a horse that truly leads to love of neighbor? ALL neighbors – whether we agree with them or not?

V. SEEING ABOUT A HORSE AND SETTING OUT

We’d never considered a horse who was afraid of a rear girth before! But then Rusty Hall told us she was just **ticklish** –that *lots* of horses are ticklish on their tummy! Hmm....maybe that issue could be worked through. Heck, we’re all ticklish on our tummies, right? Can’t that be worked through with training, much like prejudice and narrow-mindedness?

But then, our friend Katie Ferris, a long-experienced horse woman, when learning that the same horse would also startle when it experienced *flatulence*, convinced us: “You don’t want a horse that’s afraid of its own farts!”

It’s a fine line –in horses and in life. What issues are workable, and what are signs that we should look in a different direction?!

Looking for a new horse is an emotional rollercoaster. It brings up a lot of grief – you just want your Juniper back! Why did our perfectly good horse have to die?

One day you're excited about the prospects, and the next day – or even hour – your spirits have sunk again, due to some factor out of control: they have “unsafe tendencies”, the owner wants far more money for the horse than you have, the horse has a health history you haven't heard about and needs medical care right out of the gate....bad teeth, bad hooves.....

VI. WHAT WILL WE RIDE?

As people of faith, followers of Jesus, on this Round Up Sunday, what will *we* ride into the journey ahead?

How will *we* listen to the Spirit?

How much work and training do we want to put in?

It's easier, of course, and an option, just to coast along – stick with the boring, nose-to-butt-trail-riding kind of faith. Easier to just say, “We believe in God. We go to church. We try to be a good person and live a righteous life. Not hurting anybody.”

Easier to mosey along, pick the easy trails and not really delve-in, question, challenge, be challenged, open our minds *and* our faith to new learnings, new understandings – of God and of our fellow created beings—God's children all.

Easier not to *be* challenged or *to* challenge – like Jesus and the woman from another land, a person from another class, on the other side of the border.

But, we live in rugged times. The road before us is a rough one, as creatures on this planet. Rocks are being hurled at our brothers and sisters, threatening to take away human rights. Muddy bogs loom, trying to suck us in –drag us to a mindset, a place we wouldn't go otherwise.

For such a time as this, we need a steady ride. A mount, a stance that has a sure foundation – in faith. And we need look back, learn the history of our ancient faith more deeply, scout the trail,

dig a little deeper, put some elbow grease and sweat into our chosen path.

We need to choose carefully what ride and what tide we are on, as we step into the way ahead – in this season, in our faith meeting life.

What would Jesus ride? Where would Jesus lead us? Let's round 'em up, step up into the stirrup, swing a leg over, plant ourselves firmly and faithfully in the saddle and ride. Amen.