



Captive to the Word, Free in the Holy Spirit

Millbrook Messenger

August 2010

LIFE ON THE RANCH (and singing Cowboys)

Most of us are familiar with the song "O give me a home where the buffalo roam".

If that wish were to be fulfilled....there would be a lot of work cleaning up!

This year our VBS theme was Western. The place was called Saddle Ridge Ranch, a Dude ranch. A Dude Ranch is where "Greenhorns" obtain insight and experience into ranch life.

A Church is, in one sense, like a ranch. There is a lot of work to do. After all, you do want "Buffalo roaming" around. That is probably the reason God says, "Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose" (Philippians 2:12-13).

The Church, as you think about it, is the ranch house on the ranch. The ranch itself is the Kingdom. It is, ultimately, the cosmos that is being restored by our Creator.

All of God's creatures live on the ranch. The management strategy for running the ranch flows from the ranch house. Having lived on a small ranch as a boy, I am well aware of the chores allocated to each. Several hours of working cattle and feeding them was a normal morning before going to school. It did not detract from becoming our high school senior swimming champion. While my name is etched below others in a huge cup englassed in the school office, it will only remain there till Jesus returns. After that, it only matters if your name is on the list of cowboys/cowgirls that work the ranch.

Enlarging and expanding a herd, be it buffalo, cattle, or horses, is exciting and rewarding. It is also not without challenges. Ranches have snakes, gopher holes, poisonous shrubs, and rustlers, to name a few that may have a negative impact on the herd. However, if the "grass" is right, in other words, if the Word of God is being proclaimed, the herd will survive. The use of the word "survive" is intentional. On a healthy ranch, life is about more than surviving. It is about flourishing.

The seven dwarfs are surely not the only ones who can sing and whistle while they work. God celebrates "Singing Cowboys", and we better do, too!

Singing is an expression of joy. I love to sing. Joy is a source of strength and an expression of strength. Nehemiah (who was a Cowboy) said, "The joy of the Lord is my strength" (Neh. 8:9). Working a ranch is hard work; you need a lot of joy.

The apostle Paul, another cowboy, was well aware of this. He encouraged the ranch hands and said, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" (Phil 4:4).

The cost of feed and the price of beef are two essential factors in the total cost of operating a ranch. In challenging economic times like the present there are those who get discouraged. If you can identify with that, consider the following. You may be on the ranch. However, are you sitting on the porch of the ranch house? That is, are you merely sitting in the pew with ice tea? Or, are you holding a branding iron that says "Love"?

Consider the following words from an OT cowboy named Habakkuk. He had the right "feed"; still, there were challenges. Yet he concluded, "Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crops fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls...Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior" (3:18).

To work on God's ranch is best done on His terms. Jesus knew that. Surely, that is why He gave them [the disciples] power and authority over all the demons (LK 9:1). This "business plan" worked so well, that by chapter 10, 70 new cowboys have joined the "bunk house" working the ranch.

It is time to consider our ways (Haggai 1). It is time to reflect on the strength needed to work the ranch.

"O give me a home....Where never is heard a discouraging word". From the love and security of such a home it is a joy to saddle your horse, ride the trails and explore the beauty of the ranch and the love of the rancher.

PJ

"For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind."
2 Timothy 1:7.

Let us correct ourselves and others with love, humility and gentleness. Let's keep working hard for God. We obey God's guidance from the Holy Spirit of our living God by reading His holy Word and by prayer and meditation. We know little of our members' selfless endeavors for God to each other and those we don't know (perhaps yet). God blesses us and strengthens us even when we are thinking of secular concerns. Our strength grows as God gives us more faith. Even when we are mindless of Gods' blessings, they still come. We can praise God for His generosity. Thank you Lord for everything!

Even should our little church fold, God will continue to be with us as we move into other areas of ministry, as the Holy Spirit guides and provides. We love our Heavenly Daddy (agape love), the God Almighty. In Jesus Christ's wonderful and all powerful name we pray this. Amen.

Don and Sharon Johnston,

Deacons

When I read the 25th chapter of Mathew I see a vivid picture of Mankind's final destiny. It appears to be a very stern warning against those who think they "know Jesus" but do not, as determined by their behavior toward "the least of these". To those who think they are ready for Christ's return, but are not (note the prior parable of the Ten Virgins). It seems that people in this crowd are either known by Christ, or they are not; there is no middle ground. This of course, in some circles, brings up the issue of determinism versus free will. But I will not go there now, and simply accept the scripture as it is written leaving my personal bias aside. All the nations are there, Christ makes his determination as to who are sheep or goats, and their destination; some to heaven and some to hell. What is certain from this passage though, is that our response to the "least of these, my brethren" in this life, is a testimony of our spiritual position toward Christ himself, and determines an eternal outcome.

Let us now travel back into scripture to another paradox found in Matthew 7:21-23. Here again the respondents seem clueless. These folks did super-spiritual works to show their worth; like prophesying, deliverance, and miracles. They called Jesus Lord during their life, but Jesus says again "I never knew you!" Yet there were spiritual gifts exhibited, people may have even been delivered from demons, and healed of their diseases! What's up with that?

We obviously need more information, so let us now explore 1 Corinthians 13. Here the Bible is unambiguous in its admonition toward our behavioral testimony. This passage elevates "God's Love" as supreme; regardless of what apparent spiritual gifts are exhibited, or what religious commitments are made. Could it be this simple? Is it possible that our relationship with the person of Jesus and the resulting expression of His Love through us is the litmus testimony of knowing Christ? Couple this revelation with Matthew 22:36-40 and we have it: the greatest commandments are also centered in God's Love; which brings us back again to Matthew 25 and – who are the least of these our brethren?

My answer is that I don't know, in particular, who the least of these are. Surprised? Don't be. I cannot see into the hearts of people, as God does, any more than you can; nor do I have knowledge of whom God has elected for salvation. But in general, I can tell you that they are our brothers and sisters in Christ; of this I am sure. They are those in poor circumstances that have responded to the love of Christ as revealed in His gospel message, and those who will someday, respond to it. I remember how helpless I was prior to responding to His Gospel message of love, yet someone loved me at least enough to tell me. So I in turn obey God's commission to "go and make disciples of all nations" (Mat 28:19).

Moreover, let me introduce one other concept before closing. Which is, that Jesus seems to have a loving predisposition toward the poor in Mathew 25 and many other passages; have you noticed? And an apparent disdain for the behavior of the rich; does scripture bear this out? Read Matthew 11:2-6, Matthew 19:16-26 and James chapters 2 & 5 and decide for yourself. Is it possible that the "poor" or the "least of these" among us are the most fertile soil to receive the gospel message? To those determinists I ask: Is it possible that God himself has driven the homeless and destitute into their circumstances to prepare them for his message of hope? To the free will crowd: maybe the utter failures experienced through their obviously bad choices to follow their own worldly desires have put the least of these into a position necessary for their repentance and acceptance of God's truth. But these are surely my own musings. However, this concept might be worth further consideration

given the fruit we see from either demographic in the Church.

Remember the miracle of our departure from the PCUSA? For those of you who were in attendance at Presbytery that day (Kris and I where), it was clear that our Lord Jesus had pre-determined the outcome. MPC is His property, and it was given to us free-and-clear for His purposes, outside the PCUSA; no arguments accepted. So here we are, in the urban community of Central Fresno; but to what end? I personally consider these prior miraculous events a mandate from the Lord; He nested us within this neighborhood community for a reason; didn't he? Wasn't it to minister to the poor; the least of these our neighbors in their distress?

Consequently, I believe that ministering to the "least of these" which Jesus holds in such high regard should be normative for the Body of Christ. Moreover, I do not consider this activity as one of many ministries per se, but the loving tendency of the Holy Spirit at work within the truly redeemed. James reinforces this assertion as recorded in James 1:27(NIV) – Religion that God the Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress ... Also in James 2:1-8 – Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? Therefore, we see that treating the poor differently than we do those in better circumstances, says the Lord, is a sin!

Finally, throughout the four gospels Jesus himself speaks constantly about loving our neighbors, the exalted and the humble, the first and the last. One verse that stands out to me is Mathew 23:13 which accuse the religious elite of "shutting the kingdom of heaven in men's faces." I wonder if the institutional Church does this when we look upon the Homeless and poor differently, or when we ignore "those other people" that are not dressed up nicely for Sunday, or are not even able to come; the shut-ins. And how about those at the local Convalescent Hospitals; are they beyond hope, or are they our best hope for reaching the lost in our community. Note if you will how the "rich" are portrayed by Jesus in Luke 18:18-30 in contrast to the poor in Luke 4:18 and 6:20; puts a challenging perspective on who God considers ready to receive the kingdom of God, doesn't it.

So what is my final point? It is that in the context of the Great Commission, Jesus may consider our primary target audience as those whom He himself through the work of His Spirit, using life's most dire circumstances, has prepared to hear the good news of the Gospel. These represent to me, the answer we are looking for; they are "the least of these, my brethren".

Maybe, just maybe, the middle and upper class functional among us are harder to reach than the destitute. Maybe the Mary Magdalene's out there are there because the Lord has prepared them to believe the Gospel today! Are we ready to do the work of sharing the gospel with them; out there? So get out your Bibles and show me where I've gone astray. I leave this question for my brothers and sisters at MPC to ponder.

Elder Tim Lockwood

I am standing in Death Valley, on the side of the road, in mid-July. The air is ablaze with heat—124 degrees in the shade—enough to restore life to my joints that have stiffened from the long drive. Not coincidentally, I am headed for a place called Furnace Creek. Standing in Death Valley in the bright sun in mid-July, I am in a furnace of sorts. It is an experience of the extreme, yet oddly reviving; I can't help but focus on the present moment, celebrating the privilege of being alive. The intensity of the heat is matched only by the spectacle of surrounding space—a display of ranges and dunes reflecting the afternoon light in pastel shades, except for the black triangle between the hills in the distance where the sun doesn't reach. The scenery is a drama of superlatives, confronting the visitor with thoughts about the vastness of time and space, of space and being, of being and significance.

The ranges speak of mystery, daring the bold to probe the frontier between survival and doom. Like the woman who ventured off road about a year ago in her SUV, never to make it back alive. Or the Twenty-mule team that trekked through the basin some hundred years ago, enduring its unforgiving climate while hauling tens of thousands of pounds in precious gear: water, for survival, and borax, for treasure. The Twenty-mule team has since come to symbolize what it means to conquer the odds, a testimony to the human spirit and divine grace, of which, incidentally, there is a lot in Death Valley; all one has to do is look.

Grace in fact is the sacred link between past and present. Maybe that's the reason that time stands still here in Death Valley. And if you stand and listen, you can hear the Spirit through the stillness, feel it move through the heat and light that bounce off the windswept sediments of rock and salt and lime: it is the spirit of God, and Death Valley is his sanctuary, as it is to the creatures that live here, with its endless sky, its desert topography, its rocks that are too hot to hold in my bare hand in the glowing afternoon. It is a cathedral of light and space, a place of worship.

For as spacious as Death Valley is, there is no space for human pettiness. There is no space for bickering, or being hung up on the trivial; there is no space for envy or mean-spiritedness, for one-upmanship or malice or cowardice. There is no space for narrowness.

Because if the space doesn't expand your spirit, the heat will. It will strip you of all pretenses, no matter the horsepower on which you rely for deliverance, or the size of your devotional Bible, or your illusions about the past. And it's not like you have a choice. Because to experience Death Valley is to experience God's justice and mercy all at once, damnation and redemption, judgment and transforming grace. There is no safety in vanity here, no retreating to the past, no hiding behind Sunday school piety. The present is all that counts, the right-now, the living-in-the-moment. To feel God's presence is to feel alive; it is a matter of extremes. And what is more extreme than love?

For Death Valley is God's gift, to enjoy his graciousness, his unfathomable roaming spirit that infuses the rocks, the sand, the salt flats, the creatures that live here, from the lizard to the mountain lion. God's spirit is in the desert holly, the birds that nest in the higher elevations

where the Mesquite offers shade, the dark canyons, the glittering crystals, the cloudless sky. .Gone is my tiredness that I felt at home, my back ache, my worries about this and that. The heat is all I feel, its energizing, transforming power. I am grateful I am alive, grateful for God's presence in Death Valley; his life-giving breath is all I need, his unfailing love, as vast as the sky above from where the sun beats down, unrelentingly.

I continue to be taken by the desert splendor from behind the safety of tinted windows, in the air-conditioned coolness of chrome and metal. That, too, is a gift from God, compliments to the great American automaker. Only the experience isn't the same—it is at a remove, indirect, touristy, consumer-like, catering to the pampered self. Except the damage is done: Death Valley is inside of me—my defenses are down, I am a living sanctuary, my heartbeat the echo of God's gentle rhythm.

Ingrid

Thursday morning breakfast is special to me. I am the guest each week of two friends. Our discussions are lively, filled with laughter and grace. Our sharing has substance; after all, we are Christians, and our lives have purpose and meaning (I assume yours does as well).

At one point this morning we tossed around the question of why Christianity is frequently inclined to focus on negatives. Historically, elements within Western Christianity have emphasized the don'ts: don't drink, don't smoke, don't dance, don't play cards, don't.....don't do anything!

Not doing things is not the path to holiness!

It is ironic that the negatives listed above all have a counterpoint in Scripture and/or the ancient world in which Jesus lived. Wine was part of the cultural life of the Jewish world and beyond. As a former resident of the Middle East and a "reformed" smoker, "hookahs" (water pipes), which I used to smoke, were part of the culture of the days of Jesus. To prohibit dancing in light of all the recorded dancing in Scripture is simply legalistic and pathetic. Even in the playing of cards we find an echo in the casting of lots, a process to discern the will of God.

The day was filled with numerous encounters in person or by phone, all with a singular purpose....keep your eyes on Jesus, for He will sustain you. We shared stories of struggles and victories. We remembered failures, defeats and redemption. Richard Fellows called me from prison to say that he had the "paper work" to be released. After twenty five years the thought of a reunion with a Mom who has not seen her son in 34 years is enough to "stir the waters of my pool".

At this point of writing I have come out of the pool. I have swum my 30 minutes using the time to burn calories, confess sins, praise the Lord for blessings, and pray for revival at Millbrook.

Tonight I had to be patient prior to getting into the pool.

I sat on the side, relaxed, listening to the raucous laughter of my son and some of his friends splashing in the pool. How can you not smile and praise the Lord as four young men with youthful abandonment share their care and concern for each other. A Persian, a Korean, an Indian (from India), and an Anglo—Americans, in other words, swimming in the same pool.

My mind turned to the story in the Gospel of John 5. It is a well-known story of the healing of the paralytic at the pool of Bethesda. The Biblical pool was dug during the 3rd century BC by Simon the High Priest. It was used to wash sheep prior to them being offered as a sacrifice in the temple. In the days of Jesus, many invalids came to the pool believing that the "stirring of the waters" would bring them healing.

Bethesda in the Aramaic language means "House of Grace", or "House of Mercy".

I listened to these young men, bright, intelligent, and filled with respect and care for each other. I looked to the heavens and praised the Lord for our "Pool of Bethesda".

It is not, in the first instance, the absence of things that makes us holy. Rather, it is the presence. Specifically, it is the presence of the Holy Spirit within us who makes us Holy.

Our communal meal with these young men provided us another opportunity to live out our role as "Kingdom messengers". Our discussions are intentional, directive, a challenging dialogue, seeking to take every "Thought captive to Christ".

These young men are like "swallows". They keep returning. We find that encouraging as we continue to pray that all who enter our pool will experience Grace, Mercy and Healing. To that end may the Spirit of God continue to stir the waters, minds and hearts of all who enter.

Because of Jesus....ruined for the ordinary

PJ