

TWO MULES, ONE 2X4

Acts 9: 1-20, John 21: 1-19

Third Sunday of Easter

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Mules have a reputation of being stubborn animals. I have no idea whether or not this is fair to mules. I have never owned a mule nor had occasion to work with one. I have heard and used the expression, “stubborn as a mule.” I have also heard the folk wisdom that the best way to get the attention of a mule is to hit it over the head with a 2X4. That’s stubborn.

With apologies to any mules that may feel maligned by the comparison, it seems to me that we have two examples of mules in our lessons today, each requiring Jesus to pull out a 2X4. The two mules are Paul and Peter. Jesus wanted each to move in a particular direction, but they each headed in a different direction, requiring Jesus to reach for the board. Let me explain.

Jesus wanted Peter and Paul to be evangelists. Peter and Paul wanted to get together with Mary and form a singing group. I’m kidding, of course, but I am not kidding that this is about vocation.

Peter believed that his vocation was fishing. This is understandable. He had grown up on the Sea of Galilee, and he had gone into the fishing business with his brother Andrew. He took a respite from fishing in order to follow Jesus, but that was over. Oh, he had seen the empty tomb. In fact, he had seen the resurrected Christ. He believed that Jesus was alive. He just wasn’t sure what to do with that belief. Before, Jesus had always been with them and directed them. Now they were on their own. Jesus was alive, yes, but not present. So what was Peter to do? He could not teach like Jesus taught. He could not preach or heal or explain about the kingdom of God the way Jesus did. There was so much he did not understand.

He did understand fishing, though. He knew how to handle the boat. He knew how to use the nets. They were to him like clay is to the potter or paint is to the artist. So it was that as the disciples were sitting around twiddling their thumbs, he announced that he was going fishing. He was going back to a routine and practice he understood.

This was a problem. Oh, there is nothing wrong with being a fisherman, of course. The problem was that this was not what Christ wanted Peter to do. Peter had been a fisherman, but Christ called him to a new vocation. Peter, though, decided that he would become a fisherman again. He was subtly refusing Christ’s call.

Paul, formerly Saul, was anything but subtle. He not only refused to cooperate

with Jesus, he actually intentionally worked against him. We do not know what, if any, role he may have played in the crucifixion. We do know that he supported the stoning of Stephen, even holding the coats of the rock throwers. He also had the religious leaders deputize him, giving him authority to seek out those called “followers of The Way” (Christians) for the purpose of bringing them to trial. Far from spreading the gospel, he was trying to stomp it out.

Hmmm. This was Christ’s dilemma. He had two men in mind to spearhead the spread of the gospel. One was persecuting his followers. The other was running to the sea. Two mules with minds of their own. It was time for the 2X4.

Saul was on his way to Damascus in search of Christians who had fled Jerusalem. As he neared the city, a brilliant light fell upon him, putting him on his knees and blinding him. Christ spoke directly to him, asking why Saul persecuted him. Saul had no answer. What could he say? He saw the glory of Christ and heard the voice of the one he had called a menace to the faith. Oops. He had to be helped into Damascus and he did not eat for three days. Finally, Ananias, at the direction of the Holy Spirit, visited Saul, restored his sight, and essentially told him he was going to be a Christian from then on. He got no argument from Saul, who changed his name to Paul and became the preeminent missionary to the Gentiles and the author of much of the New Testament. His conversion, his change of direction, was clearly a 2X4 experience.

Peter was on the boat fishing with some of the other disciples. A stranger appeared on the beach asking about their fishing fortune. They reported they had caught nothing. He directed them to a miraculous catch, and they figured out that he was the risen Christ. He called them to the beach for a fish fry.

After breakfast, Jesus singled out Peter for some questioning. Three times he directly asked Peter, “Do you love me?” Each time Peter answered, “Yes,” and Jesus responded, “Then feed my sheep.” Three times he asked! John tells us that Peter felt hurt that Jesus kept asking him, as if he didn’t believe him. Some say that Jesus asked him to affirm his love three times to counterbalance the three times Peter had denied him in the courtyard. Maybe, or maybe it was just another form of the 2X4. Jesus was hammering the message home. You are not a fisherman. You are a shepherd. If you love me, it is no longer appropriate for you to fish. You must tend to my followers. Get it in your mind. No more going back to the old ways. You have been selected for something new. Peter did not look back again and became the undisputed leader of the early church.

Two mules, one 2X4. I don’t know about you, but it intrigues me that the two most influential leaders of the early church, Peter and Paul, both needed the proverbial whack on the head with a 2X4 to knock them out of their mule-like state. We know them

to be exceptionally faith-filled and charismatic and completely and fearlessly committed to the cause. They faced danger and ridicule and physical abuse and even death without flinching. It is doubtful that we would be Christian today without them. Yet, once upon a time, Christ had to strike one of them blind and confront the other one on the beach to get their attention and to get them doing what Christ wanted them to do.

That is cause for pause, not to disparage them or to prove that they were not so perfect. The point is that this should cause us to wonder about ourselves. These men were heroes! Thus, their stubbornness begs the question, if Jesus had to use a 2X4 with Peter and Paul, what does he have to do to get our attention? Arrange the stars to spell out a message in the sky? Text message our cell phones every few minutes? Spam our e-mail? Send a plague of cicadas? What would it take?

I am not suggesting that God expects us to be Peter or Paul, and we better get on the stick. I do believe, however, that God has called each one of us to serve in some way, to fulfill some purpose for God. Are we paying attention to that call – listening for that call? Are we obeying? I think back to my own experience of deciding about going into ordained ministry. My father was a pastor and I grew up in the church. I have always loved the church and there was never any question that I would be active in some capacity. I also had a strong feeling from early on that God intended for me to be a pastor. At the same time, I had other interests and pursued them. In ways far too numerous to recount this morning, God continually redirected me back to ministry. Some doors slammed shut. Others swung wide open. Still, I had other interests and I pursued them. Once, when I was determined to do something else, my spirit was so troubled that I finally had to go off by myself for a lengthy discussion with God to explain why I was going in a different direction. Instead, it was explained to me that I was not. It was a 2X4 experience. Please understand, I have no regrets. My point is not that I am a reluctant preacher, but that in my stubbornness I needed my attention focused. There are thousands of clergy and missionaries and evangelists and church workers who can tell similar stories.

In fact, I believe most people can tell similar stories. God calls us to do something or to be something. We nod and then choose to do something or be something else. The reasons are many. Maybe we truly do not hear the call or we do not understand the call. More often we do not think we have the ability to do what God is asking, or we do not like to do what God is asking, or it will cost us something that we do not want to give. Sometimes others pressure us and talk us out of it. I knew a young lady who has been given a real passion for social ministry and a clear call to work among the poor. Her parents feared she would never make any money doing that and, out of concern for her

financial security, did everything to move her in a different direction. Eventually she relented and accepted work that did not inspire her or accomplish what God wanted.

What is the resurrected Christ saying to you? Understand, God's call may not be for a lifetime, and it may not be directly connected to church. There may be occasions in your extended family or your work place or your community or your country in which you are needed. Maybe you have the particular talent, or the financial resources, or the discerning spirit, or the wisdom, or the time, or the experience that is required. The possibilities are endless because God uniquely calls each one of us. When God does, it is worth listening. When we give ourselves to God, when we put ourselves at God's disposal, and when we center our lives on what pleases God, we experience life as God intended it for us, which is life as it should be.

Now you might be saying all well and good, but how do we know it is God calling? After all, Christ hasn't struck us blind on the road to Damascus or shown up on the beach to serve us breakfast and talk. What are our clues? From my experience of being whacked over the head more than once, this is what I have learned: if you keep getting pushed in a particular direction in life; or coincidences keep lining up in the same direction; or friends and strangers keep saying, "You really should consider this;" or there are no compelling problems or issues in your life and, yet, you feel unsettled and out of sorts; or you wake up often at night sure someone has been speaking to you; or the sermon always seems directed at you no matter the topic; or your heart warms whenever you hear about a particular topic; or you have the constant suspicion, "I really should be doing this," then God may be reaching for the 2X4. Pay attention. For as stubborn as we are, God is more stubborn, yet, and just doesn't go away.

Once upon a time, two mules got it right between the eyes. "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Peter, if you love me, feed my sheep." What is God saying to you?

Amen.