

“Wild as a Horse, Stubborn as a Mule”

Psalm 32

Series: Deeper Week 6. Clear the Air

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October 29, 2017

I'm not great with horses. You know those trail rides people take out West? Without fail, I always get the horse named Demon Seed, Satan's Spawn, the Widowmaker. Somehow my horse always knows it has a dumb human at the other end of the reigns. So it hangs back from the crowd, refuses to obey my commands and tries to brush me off with tree branches. Inevitably, I also wind up behind the horse that's putting out a lot of...exhaust.

My worst experience, however, was not on horseback. On one family vacation when my children were young we stopped by a corral but all the horses were out. “Don't worry,” the trainer offered. “Your kids can ride these ponies. In fact, they can ride them for as long as they like. No limit.” Unlimited pony rides. Fantastic. Only one problem. Lisa and I had to lead the ponies around. I thought, “They're just ponies. How hard can this be?” They were fine until we led them down to the meadow. When we arrived the ponies immediately put their noses down in the clover and would not budge. I waved the reigns. Nothing. I said, “Giddy up” She kept eating. Then I remembered the advice the trainer gave us. To prevent them from eating, I must grip the reigns right next to the horse's mouth. Now I don't know if you've noticed this, but even a pony's mouth is as big as a bear trap. I slowly moved my hand close to those huge white teeth. The pony sensed my fear. When I got her up out of the grass, she started chomping her choppers, blowing heavily on my hand, whipping her head around. The pony walked a few feet then put her head down to eat. Once more I slid my hand down the reigns, pulled up her head only to have her stop, drop and munch a few feet later. This must be the daughter of Mr. Ed. I was embarrassed to admit defeat to my wife but when I suggested taking the ponies back she said, “Yes! Let's go now!” So our all day pony ride lasted about 10 minutes. When we turned our backs and walked away from the corral I think I heard the ponies laughing at us.

Ponies, horses and mules have minds of their own. They're not crazy about cooperating with our plans. During a casting call for the right horse to be in our latest video we received this reaction from one of the actors (video of horse opening wide to stick out his tongue).

If you want to have a deeper relationship with God there will come a time when you realize you are being as hungry as a pony, wild as a horse, stubborn as a mule. This is a make or break through moment. Up to now you may be okay with what it takes to go Deeper – step off the dock and follow Jesus, clean out the idols, get some Sabbath rest, open up in prayer, give thanks. That's all good. It's been personal but now it gets really personal. To go deeper we need to Clear the Air, be honest with God and ask forgiveness for past and ongoing sins and mistakes. This means confession. The minute this topic comes up we want to put our head down and dig in our hooves. Even King David resisted God at this point. In Psalm 32 the Lord tells David,

Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you. (Psalm 32:9)

God doesn't want to force us to confess and come to Him. He invites us to come willingly.

Yet we **Hide**. We put our head down and resist being honest with God. For many, the word confession conjures up images of the Confessional – a dark room where you tell your sins to a priest and receive absolution. A study by Georgetown University, a Catholic college, found only 2 percent of Catholics regularly go to confession and 75 percent never go or go less than once a year. In some churches the Confessional is so rarely used it's now “a storage closet for vacuum cleaners, brooms, and cleaning products.”¹ I wince when I hear members who grew up Catholic say to me, “Now that we go to Woodside we don't have to confess anymore.” It's certainly uncomfortable and embarrassing to admit your faults and ask forgiveness. Yet confession is essential for a healthy relationship, especially your relationship with God. The Apostle John says,

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (I John 1:8-9)

When we hide our faults and sins we not only deceive others, we lie to ourselves. We live in denial. Seth Stephens-Davidowitz, a former data scientist at Google, used his data-analysis skills to learn what is really on Americans' minds. He found the queries people type into search engines don't match what they say on surveys about pornography or prejudice. So he wrote a book called *Everybody Lies*.

People can say one thing and do something totally different. You see the darkness that is often hidden from polite society. The thing that you see is a widespread insecurity. I think people put on a front, whether it's to friends or on social media, of having things together and being sure of themselves and confident and polished. But we're all anxious. We're all neurotic. I now assume that people are going through some sort of struggle, even if you wouldn't know that from their Facebook posts.²

Hiding and denial allow sins and troubles to grow like black mold in the dark.

Last Monday Woodside hosted a Town Hall Meeting on the dangers of the opioid epidemic and some solutions for combating this plague. A video of the presentations is posted on our website and Facebook page. I strongly urge everyone to watch this video. Here are just a few shocking statistics about this deadly disease.

American deaths in Vietnam War (10 years) – 58,209
In 2016 there were more than 64,000 lethal drug overdoses in the US

In the Vietnam War, Korean War and WWI, just under 229,000 American died
In the last 5 years, there have been more than 248,000 opioid overdose deaths in the USA

Let's bring it closer to home:

¹<https://www.bostonglobe.com/ideas/2014/02/16/catholic-confession-steep-price/NbMVFFYljv26Gcphu17yPJ/story.html>

² Olga Khazan, "Our Searches, Ourselves," *The Atlantic* (6-9-17)

Of the 67 Pennsylvania Counties, 5 had more than 100 deaths by overdose -- Bucks County is one of them.

Opioid overdoses are up 65% in Bucks County in 2017 (we've already had more than all of 2016).

More people die from opioid overdose than from traffic accidents.

Many want to point fingers at youth, drug companies, doctors, pharmacies, the pushers, the drug cartels. Who are our greatest enemies in this war? Silence. Secrecy. Denial. Hiding. Silence keeps us from talking about this problem or any problem. Secrecy prevents us from getting help. Denial deceives us into thinking there is no problem or it will go away. Hiding allows it to multiply.

Hiding leads to **Pain**. Here is what King David discovered when he hid his sins.

When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. (Psalm 32:3-4)

Hiding and holding in his sin causes David to suffer – physically, emotionally and spiritually. Let's be honest: we are all addicted...to sin. The longer we hide it, the more it grows and the more painful it becomes. Sin always has a cost. Sin always leads to consequences which cause pain to ourselves and those we love. When pain comes we can either dull the pain with more sin and continue the cycle or we can cry "Enough," come out of hiding, break the silence, and seek help and forgiveness.

Pain leads to **Confession**. This is David's next step.

Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD." And you forgave the guilt of my sin. (Psalm 32:5)

Confession means being honest with ourselves and God. It's important to be specific. We need to do a personal review of all the sins we are holding in. Roger Barrier says when he left for college his mother gave him a canvas duffel bag and told him, "Put your dirty clothes in this every night. At the end of the week, wash them at the laundromat." When the bag was full he went to the laundromat. To save a little time, he threw the whole duffel bag in the washer, added powder, inserted the quarters and pushed start. In no time a loud, "thump, thump, thump" filled the laundromat. Another student said, "I think the clothes will get cleaner if you take them out of the bag." Roger adds,

One day, when my relationship with God was hurting, I remembered my laundry episode. I realized the way I confessed sins—"Dear God, please forgive me for all the sins I've committed today"—was about as effective in cleansing them as my first attempt at washing clothes. Each sin needs individual attention.³

³ Roger Barrier, Listening to the Voice of God, found in Men of Integrity (March/April 2006); April 6

Partial, superficial or half-hearted confessions don't really clear the air. By surveying 4,000 people researchers found those who only partially confessed a transgression felt worse than those who do not confess at all. In the study, "I Cheated but Only a Little" the lead author reports,

People seeking redemption by partially admitting their big lies feel guiltier because they do not take complete responsibility for their behaviors." The Harvard Business Review summarized the research this way: "Confession is a powerful way to relieve guilt, but it works only if you tell the whole truth."⁴

So here is an exercise to help you completely clear the air. Inside your bulletin is a page called Personal Review. Three causes which trigger sin are when we feel angry, afraid or attracted. These may be:

- People: family, friends, neighbors, coworkers, classmates, enemies
- Organizations or institutions: The government, your company, the church, the economy
- Circumstances: Success, failure, job loss, health problems, marriage, divorce, loneliness
- Substances: alcohol, drugs, food, porn, gambling, spending

In the left-hand column you can write all the people, circumstances or things which cause you to feel angry, afraid or attracted. For example your Boss. In the next column write the cause – why you feel that way. "He yelled at me when I came in late. Criticized my work before others." In the next column write how that affects you. "I feel embarrassed. It affects my self-esteem and wounds my pride." Without excusing what your boss did, in the last column write your part in the problem. "I come in late often. I'm not giving my best effort." Continue to write down what makes you feel angry, afraid or attracted and then fill in the rest of the columns. There is no right or wrong answer here. It's what you are holding inside. The most important principle is to be as thorough as possible. If you take this exercise seriously, if you are truly honest with yourself, you will uncover issues and sins you didn't realize are hiding in your heart and causing you pain.

When you are ready, I encourage you to find a trusted, confidential, brother or sister in Christ and share your confession with them. You can each hear one another's confession. Then tell each other, "In Jesus Christ, you are forgiven." That is a powerful moment. The Good News is that Confession leads to **Forgiveness**. God always forgives. He wipes away the guilt. It's not just that the slate is clean. The heaviness, the weight of sin is gone. You don't have to carry it.

Then Forgiveness leads to **Guidance**. Confession is not just about setting right wrongs in the past. It's also about walking the right path in the future. David says to the Lord,

You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance. (Psalm 32:7)

The Lord replies to David,

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my loving eye on you. (Psalm 32:8)

⁴ "Telling the Whole Truth May Ease Feelings of Guilt," American Psychological Association (1-23-14)

Instead of hiding from God, the Lord becomes David's hiding place. When we come out of the darkness, break the silence and start a new direction, we need the protection of a hiding place. I frequently hear stories of those who enter in-patient rehab, get sober, start recovery and are doing well until they come out and go back among the same crowd which fueled the addiction in the first place.

When you confess to God, receive His forgiveness and break the power of sin, you can't stand still. You need protection or you will fall back into the problem. God is your Hiding Place. Find an accountability partner. Surround yourself with a community of believers; dig deep into His Word, listen to His Spirit to receive the guidance that will keep you on the way you should go. Start the difficult yet necessary task of setting things right and making amends. Gather here and celebrate our God who never stops loving us, never stops forgiving us, never gives up on us, never stops guiding us. David finishes his confession with **Celebration**:

The LORD's unfailing love surrounds the one who trusts in him. Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart! (Psalm 32:10-11)

Let me tell you the story of a man who hated God. This was a problem because he was a Catholic priest and a monk. His anger toward God came from an overwhelming fear that God was angry at his sins. Guilt gripped him. When he looked inside, he saw a heart as wild as a horse and stubborn as a mule. So, like any good monk, he went to confession – a lot. He would confess every day, sometimes several times a day. He would pray and fast for hours trying his best to please, what he thought, was an angry wrathful God.

I was a good monk, and I kept the rule of my order so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery it was I. All my brothers in the monastery who knew me will bear me out. If I had kept on any longer, I should have killed myself with vigils, prayers, reading, and other work.

His confessions became so extreme that his superior in the monastery said,

“Look here,” he said, “if you expect Christ to forgive you, come in with something to forgive – blasphemy, adultery – instead of all these peccadilloes. Man, God is not angry with you. You are angry with God. Don't you know that God commands you to hope?”

While teaching a class on the book of Romans this monk's wild and stubborn heart was finally set free. He discovered the way to God's heart is not by works but simply by faith in Jesus.

If you have a true faith that Christ is your savior, then at once you have a gracious God, for faith leads you in and opens up God's heart and will, that you should see pure grace and overflowing love.

Thereupon I felt myself reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the “justice of God” had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate of heaven.

With this discovery - that we are saved by faith, that we can freely and without fear confess our sins and be forgiven by a loving God, that monk, Martin Luther, began the revolution we call the Reformation.

This Tuesday, October 31 will mark the 500th Anniversary of the start of the Reformation. Believe it or not, the Reformation was launched because of a bad building campaign. The Pope wanted to raise money to build St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. So he and others sent preachers throughout Europe to sell indulgences. If you paid money, you received a piece of paper guaranteeing you or a loved one would be forgiven sin and set free from Purgatory. It was a get out of Purgatory free card. The preachers cried, "When the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs." Luther could not believe they were selling forgiveness. He was certain the Pope had no idea what was going on. He had no desire to divide the Church. He simply wanted to reform it based on God's Word. So on the night before All Saints Day, the story goes, Luther nailed 95 theses to the church door protesting this practice. It was a small act, a spark, which ignited the fire that changed the Church and the world.

We do not hide from God. We do not buy forgiveness. We cannot earn forgiveness. By His unconditional love and grace, God freely gives it through faith in Jesus Christ.

We do not give to win God's favor. We do not give to earn God's love. We do not give to prove our faith. We give, we serve, we pray, we worship, we confess, we love, because God first loved us (I John 4:19). It took a wild monk, a stubborn monk, a monk who hated God to teach us just how much God loves us.