

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
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Driving the Chariot

Romans 12:1-2, 9-21

In the earlier years of our marriage,
Mary Ellen and I bought a used piece of exercise equipment.
It wasn't anything elaborate or expensive,
just several oddly shaped metal bars, bent at weird angles,
attached by a spring hinge.
It was one of those magical machines that if you used it just right,
was supposed to crunch your tummy and give you abs of steel.

I think we used it about a week.
Mary Ellen's complaint to me pretty much summed up our experience:
She said, "What good is it? It doesn't make the sit-ups any *easier!*"
This was true, since the point of the machine
was to make you do the sit-ups *correctly*,
which – while it may be better for you – is considerably harder.

I was reminded of this experience this week
as I listened to a member of this congregation say to me
that being a Christian doesn't make life any easier;
most of the time, following Jesus makes life harder:
being a disciple, struggling against sin,
trying to love the neighbor, even love the enemy,
and to keep praying about everything.
It's much easier just to live for yourself and to do what comes naturally.
This also is true, since the point of all that Jesus teaches
is to lead us into the kind of life God intends us to live,
which – while it may be better for us – is considerable harder
in a broken world such as ours.

The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Romans,
gives us a similar bit of counsel;
sort of his version of "No pain, no gain."

Paul appeals to believers

*"to present your bodies as a living sacrifice,
holy and acceptable to God,
which is your spiritual worship (also transl. reasonable service).
Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed,
by the renewing of your minds,*

*so that you may discern what is the will of God –
what is good and acceptable and perfect.”*

A living sacrifice. Reasonable service. Transformation.
Renewing of the mind.

Even with the preface that these things come *by the mercies of God*
they sound like a lot of work.

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Roberta Bondi has written a wonderful book entitled
To Love as God Loves (Fortress, 1987),
which brings us into conversation with the desert fathers and mothers
of the early centuries of the Christian church.
She reminds us that the early monastics insisted that
“we do not really love God from the day we first become a Christian.”
We may have warm feelings toward God, or a sense of reverence,
“but we cannot love God as God really is
because our vision is too distorted.
We can only grow into love as the power of [our sinful urges] weakens.”
And like strengthening the muscles of our body,
it takes work and struggle to strengthen the human heart in this way.

To help us understand this conviction of these early Christians
we need to understand their model of psychology
which was rather different than our modern understanding.
This ancient understanding of the human psyche
comes from the philosophy of Plato.
One of the most frequent metaphors used to illustrate this psychology
was that of “a charioteer driving a chariot pulled by two horses.”
“The two horses are two basic impulses, or life forces within us,
which make us interact with our world by
drawing things into ourselves
and pushing ourselves against other things.
These are called the “*appetitive* and the *spirited*,” or “*desire* and *anger*.”
These impulses are two sources of energy
one bringing the outside world to the self,
the other pushing against it.
What we ordinarily think of as desire and anger,
sexual attraction and repulsion, compassion and contempt,
are fueled by these basic impulses...
When these drives function as they are meant to
they are good;
they are part of our nature, given to us by God in our creation.

They are the horses for our chariot."

But who drives the chariot?

In the ancient understanding,
the driver of the chariot is "reason."

It is reason that enables us to see the world aright
and to respond to others not simply out of our physical needs and desires,
but consciously and morally.

"For the Christian monastics,
this meant to see and know God, to see as God sees,
and to love God and other people.

"Acts of compassion and forgiveness, worship, insight into others,"
may be fueled by the energies of appetite and spirit,
but they are governed by reason, the charioteer.

"If reason is somehow overthrown by the horses, however,
chaos results.

The energy of the horses
becomes the source of power for various destructive passions,
and the human personality is turned over to these passions
which victimize it and destroy it
as they repeatedly try unsuccessfully to satisfy themselves."

One early mystic, Gregory of Nyssa, likened these passions
to the brickmold the Israelites in Egypt used to make bricks
to illustrate insatiability of the passions:

"Just as the mold was continually filled with mud for the brick,
and just as continually emptied out to be refilled,
so are our desires when not governed by reason."

Think about it: it's what keeps our economy running.

A new car this year doesn't prevent the same desire next year
when the new lines are introduced.

A life that takes its meaning from eating, or sex,
or accumulating possessions
can never be fulfilled because the desires can never be
permanently satisfied.

In the ancient psychology,
only with reason in control are the two basic life energies
good for us and others rather than hurtful.

But when thinking about reason,
we have to be careful not to make a modern mistake.

When we think of reason, we often think of logic,
like the logic of the enigmatic Mr. Spock on Star Trek,

who resisted the whims of human emotion,
trying always to rely on cold, hard logic.
For Spock, logic provided the only clear view of reality,
and human emotions, like love, only clouded that view.

Nothing could be further than this
from the ancient understanding of reason.
Reason was anything but cold logic.
Reason was intertwined with love. In fact, reason served love.
Love enables human reason, and draws reason to what's good and true.
Today we are taught that love blinds us,
and causes bias, which is counter to reason;
but not so with the ancients.
Only when guided by love is reason able to show us the truth about God,
about the world, about other people, and about ourselves.
For us as Christians, this makes perfect sense
because we believe that God *is* love,
which means that since God has created all that exists,
God's love must run through the very structures of reality.
If God has created the world in love,
then only love can enable us to see the world rightly.
Love makes us more reasonable, not less so.

So, our human lives are like a chariot,
fueled by the energy of two horses, or life forces:
the appetitive and the spirited,
or desire and anger,
drawing the world into ourselves
and pushing out against the world;
and the chariot is driven, guided, governed by reason,
which is only true reason when it arises from love
the power which holds the universe together.

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Now, it's very interesting to read Paul's letter to the Romans
in light of this ancient psychology (look at the text).
Do not be conformed to this age;
do not be given to pure passion, ungoverned by love or reason.
But be transformed by the renewing of your mind
To learn to love as God loves is to see the world rightly,
that is, *so that you may discern what is the will of God –*
what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Then, looking down at v. 9, as Paul describes this *transformed* life,
his first, governing principle is love: *Let love be genuine.*
Then as we go down through the list of these Marks of the Christian Life,
we can begin to see the two life energies, these two horses at work,
drawing in and pushing out.

hate what is evil – which horse? The Spirited, anger, pushing evil away.
hold fast to what is good – which horse? The Appetite, desire, drawing in.
love one another with mutual affection – Desire, drawing in.
outdo one another in showing honor – Spirited maybe?

I think this means if you're going to climb a ladder of competition,
compete not for victory over others,
or for greater success or status,
but compete to honor others more than they honor you.

Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord – Spirited!
Extend hospitality to strangers – Appetitive?

Drawing others in instead of pushing away from others.
Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep –
this is very much the energy of desire, of drawing others in,
so that their experience becomes so much your own,
that you live in solidarity with them.

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God.
Clearly this is a for love to govern and restrain the horse of anger
which would otherwise lash out in violence against the enemy.

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.
This also is the Spirited horse, it seems.

Love not only receives others, but goes on the offensive against evil.
A maneuver which takes a very skilled charioteer.

All of this makes it more clear why the early Christians believed that
loving God takes a lifetime of spiritual growth.

We do not – we cannot – truly love God
the moment we become a Christian –
we must learn and refine the skill,
as a charioteer becomes more skilled at driving the chariot
only after many years of practice and experience.

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A couple of closing illustrations may give us something to chew on.

One of the common but not so simple challenges of life for many people,
are the in-laws.

When you spend time at your in-laws house, or with them in your house,
there may be certain times that you experience the power

of the horses – particularly the spirited horse.
You may be a Christian, and you may be growing in love,
but navigating your way through the rocky terrain of in-law relations
takes years and years of practice and hard learning.

Or, for some, the appetites present a challenge.
Perhaps you love to eat as much as I do,
especially the things that are bad for you.
Learning to control the body's cravings
for sugar, fat, chocolate, or strong drink, takes intense effort.
Just ask anyone on a diet, or any recovering alcoholic.

But perhaps the most challenging kind of love is the love of enemies.
My conversation this week with my friend who lamented how hard it is
to be a Christian,
ended up focusing on "the BTK killer."
When we see a man who has done what he's done,
who has betrayed his society and his Christian brothers and sisters,
who has sneered in the face of God,
we feel an intense hatred.

Many of us would be perfectly willing to push the button
on whatever device would end his life.
But what if love is driving our chariot?
How then must we guide our horses?

*Let love be genuine. Hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good.
...never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God.
Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

Following Jesus isn't easy.
Living as God intends for us to live is the great challenge of our existence,
for we live in a broken, corrupted darkness,
where we cannot properly see.
But in Christ, we are called to give the reins of our chariot to God,
and *by God's mercies to present our bodies as a living sacrifice,
holy and acceptable to God.*
It is our reasonable service –
and at once the hardest and most blessed life we can live.

So ride on, Christian friends!