

“Ox in the Ditch”

Exodus 21:28-36

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I am happy to report that there is no ox in the ditch at Salem this morning, but there is part of one in the kitchen. The occasion, sadly, is not festive for the ox itself, since the ox made the ultimate sacrifice to become an accompaniment to our lunch. Since the ox laid down his life for us, I decided the least I could do would be to devote a sermon to the noble beast.

Noble—an **ox**—noble? I have heard persons compared to oxen, with disgust (dumb as an ox), mirth (clumsy as an ox), and grudging admiration (strong as an ox), but I have never heard that the ox was a noble animal. No sports team has adopted the name of the ox as its own. Other bovines like the buffalo and the longhorn, to be sure, but never the ox.

Our image of the ox is one of a slow, stupid, powerful but plodding creature. To my knowledge, no state or nation has claimed the

ox as its official animal. The image of the ox is not a captivating one. A draft animal constantly under the yoke, sometimes accidentally dangerous and often mean, the ox may be tasty, may still be useful in some parts of the world, but never has the ox been inspirational. Dull and deadly, or deadly dull, would come closer to our image of the beast.

The ox was an important animal in Bible times and is an important biblical subject. The Good Book mentions oxen no fewer than 164 times (68 in the first five books). What is an ox? How does it differ from a cow or a yak? Beats me. Why should we care? Oh, all right, then, if you're **really** interested, the ox is a large, four-footed, horned, domesticated draft animal. According to the Bible, the ox is a “clean” animal, even if it is not noble. The ox has utility: it is fit for honest work, for milk and meat, and for temple sacrifice.

Its modern equivalent is the farm tractor, our multiple-purpose implement for plowing, pulling, and hauling. The tractor's use is in

some ways more limited. It has no nutritional value or religious significance and runs on non-renewable fossil fuel. In some areas of the world today oxen still outnumber tractors, perhaps wisely so.

In ancient times having at least one ox was a bare minimum for the subsistence farmer. On the other hand, to have a herd of oxen was a symbol of wealth and social status. Beef was not what was for dinner in the poor Ancient Near Eastern household. An ox roast would have amounted to a feast, a royal banquet for the average Israelite. Only on a special occasion would an ox be slaughtered—the homecoming of the Prodigal Son, when the fatted calf was barbecued.

Because oxen were valuable to an agrarian economy, the Covenant Code (Jewish case law) is specific about their care and about grievances arising because of them. This morning's scripture from Exodus 21 lays down three laws for settling disputes related to oxen. A fourth law, set forth in the first verses of the following chapter, deals with the theft of oxen and relates

directly to the Sixth Commandment (*thou shalt not steal*) and the Tenth Commandment (*thou shalt not covet thy neighbors . . . ox*), both recorded in Exodus 20.

Jewish oxen (that is, oxen belonging to Jews) were luckier than most; they were given sabbath rest. They were not worked on Saturdays. The Fourth Commandment states expressly that because God rested on the seventh day of creation, nobody and nothing else works either.

But there were special provisions set forth for emergency situations. Sabbath rest could be set aside if an ox were in the ditch. He could be fed, watered, tended, and extricated as quickly as possible. A family's livelihood was not to be compromised because of an animal left unattended. Jesus makes reference to this when he is taken to task by the leader of the synagogue for healing on the sabbath.

And he (Jesus) went on from there and entered their synagogue. And behold, there was a man with a withered hand. And they asked him, "Is

it lawful to heal on the sabbath?" so that they might accuse him. He said to them, "What man of you, if he has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value is a man than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the sabbath." (Matthew 12:9-12)

Jesus was the beginning of the end of Sunday blue laws. When the sheep (or the ox) is in the ditch, get him out, even if it is the sabbath. It is an act of mercy and of economic common sense. The sabbath, Jesus says, was made for humans, not the other way around. The trouble with us is that many of us are out of balance the other way. We stay so busy even, or especially, on the sabbath that we too—as surely as did Jesus' accusers—forget the original and primary purpose of the day was one of rest, restoration, and honoring God.

I have thought a lot about this across the years, especially those years I pastored a large congregation in Grand Rapids, and most especially during the summers there where I worked most weekends while my parishoners

were golfing or sailing or lounging by Lake Michigan. The Mayflower edifice was a lovely and imposing Georgian Colonial structure, much like Salem in Ladue UMC. It was the sort of setting tailor-made for brides who wanted a formal wedding. Most summer weekends were booked solid. So . . . premarital counseling (3 sessions), Friday night rehearsal and rehearsal dinner, Saturday wedding and reception, and I still had to preach on Sundays.

Summers bore down on me and wore me down, leaving me feeling bereft, beset, and besieged. I remember one summer in particular. Having worked both Memorial Day weekend and Fourth of July weekend, my wife and I had decided to knock off work for the Labor Day weekend and drive down to visit our Missouri relatives.

I don't know how it is with you, but I go through the tortures of the condemned getting things in "dying condition" before leaving town. You know what I mean. I'm the guy who follows his mother's instructions to always wear clean underwear and socks so as not to be embarrassed if he is injured in transit and has

to be stripped down by nurses in the ER. I want to leave everything in order before I go, so just in case I don't come back, nobody else will have to clean up my mess. I know this is crazy, but those of you who are also crazy in this way will understand!

As I was beginning to tell you, the last day of August began quietly, as I called to mind in a devotional moment the opening words of the *Desiderata: Go placidly amid the noise and haste, remembering what peace there may be in solitude.* I claimed that as my mantra for the day, as I put on the coffee pot, answered my overnight email, and performed my morning ablutions. Despite the fact that our staff had been shut out of our offices for two days while a new transformer was being installed, I was determined not to get my tail feathers in a twist with the "getting-ready-to-leave-town miseries.

Three unanticipated hospital visits, two drop-bys, and two construction-related mini-crises later, I repaired to the dusty, dim lair that used to be my office, I found myself running out of daylight and facing a small sea of telephone

messages that needed a response. My good resolve of the morning flew straight out the window as I watched the copier sorter jam and consume the document I was trying to reproduce.

I had lost my perspective. In life there are things that are urgent **and** important, other things that are important **but not urgent**, and still others that are urgent **but not important.** My life seems to major in the minors of this last category—those things that in their urgency absolutely demand immediate attention, but which are of little or no importance.

My mother is long gone, but I can still hear her exasperated and urgent voice: "Kenny you come in here **this minute!** Or again: Make yourself useful **right now!** I have by this time long since internalized urgencies that are no longer important.

Well, to bring the old Labor Day story to its belated conclusion . . . We finally did get out of town for a marvelous holiday, only to learn, upon returning to Grand Rapids that my father

passed away while we were in transit; so I had to book a flight and return to Missouri for the funeral. The flight down was conducive to reflection on Lee, my step-dad, who for most of his working life was a customer service manager for the local gas company. The word “no” was not in Lee’s vocabulary, when it came to taking care of customers. May his tribe increase! He was part of the “Greatest Generation” that is dying at the rate of a thousand a day. I think customer service is dying with that generation.

Lee loved nothing so much as being the guy who helped get the ox out of the ditch. He was a soft touch for customers with late night furnace or hot water heater problems. Even after he left the gas company’s employ, he was always helping somebody out of trouble. When Lee gave up the company truck, Lee kept a full range of tools in the trunk of his large sedan. He wanted to be ready in case he was needed. How many thousands of dollars he cost the gas company by dispensing free service no one will ever know. I always thought it was his sweet revenge for being hurried into early retirement

at the tender age of 68, a company sin he never forgave.

The trouble with such yesteryear reveries is that before long something like free association sets in and I am thinking about my own life, about how much I want to be wanted and need to be needed. Like Lee and other old fire horses, when the bell rings, I want to be off and running. I think of the secondary gains I receive by helping people deal with crises, whether they are the sheep of my flock or the children of my household.

Even when I am consumed by minutia that feels like nothing so much as being nibbled to death by little ducks, I know that my very complaining about it serves to remind me and others that I have a function, that I matter to somebody on this earth. Finally, I begin to wonder whether I am the guy who helps get the ox out of the ditch, or whether I am the ox—head down, ox-eyed under the yoke, watching my feet as I make the treadmill turn, pulling my load, trying to stay out of the ditch, and hoping I’m at least a Jewish ox, so I get a day of rest this week.

Now my mind goes back to treasured verses from Psalm 139. *Thou hast beset me behind and before, and laid thine hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high. I cannot attain unto it.*—Psalm 139:5, 6 (KJV)

To be beset means to be both hounded and hedged about, both prodded and protected, bedeviled and befriended, beleaguered and beloved. The Devil may be in the details, but God is in the design, and I forget this at the peril of my peace of mind and the peril of my eternal soul.

Remember this the next time you are “being had” sideways and six ways to Sunday by whatever forces are operating in your life. Do what is yours to do, knowing that getting the ox out of the ditch isn’t about you; it’s about the ox and the neighbor to whom the ox belongs. Sooner or later your ox will be in the ditch too, and you’ll remember what a real crisis feels like. And if you’re lucky . . . no, if you are blessed, there will be a friend there to help you pull him out. And you will need a friend, because no

man or woman ever yet pulled an ox out of a ditch without help. And if you are a person of faith, you will know that a divine hand is helping too, for, as poet James Russell Lowell once wrote: *“for...behind the dim unknown Standeth God within the shadow Keeping watch above his own.”*

