

Discipleship Lessons I Learned From The Horse Whisperer

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"Do not be as the horse or as the mule which have no understanding, Whose trappings include bit and bridle to hold them in check, Otherwise they will not come near to you." Psalm 32:9

Let me begin this article with a "disclaimer". Here it is: I know nothing about horses. My knowledge of horses is limited to old episodes of "Mr. Ed" and John Wayne movies where the Duke always seemed to ride a horse that was just a bit small for him (What was that all about?). It was probably God's mercy on the horse that prevented me from having one while managing a local Christian guest ranch for 5 years. My favorite "horse-ism" comes from Bum Phillips, the former coach of the Houston Oilers (now the Tennessee Titans). He raised horses and retired to his horse ranch in the early 1990s. When asked why he liked horses so much he replied, *"Because a horse doesn't talk about you behind your back."* Hmmm. We could use more horses in ministry. So, there's my disclaimer. Now, here's my article.

If you haven't seen the 1998 Robert Redford movie "The Horse Whisperer," then you've missed a treat. The movie is well done, brilliantly acted and set against Montana scenery that is nothing short of breath-taking (even for those of us who live in the Northwest).

The movie goes something like this. Thirteen-year old Grace MacLean and her best friend Judith go out early one winter's morning to ride their horses. As they are riding up an icy slope, one of the horses falls, dragging both horses and girls onto a road where a truck appears, resulting in a horrific accident in which Judith and her horse are killed, while Grace and her horse, Pilgrim, are both severely injured. Against the advice of friends and vets, the mom (Annie) chooses not to have Pilgrim put down. Grace loses her right leg below the knee. She eventually recovers, but is deeply traumatized, becoming angry and withdrawn. Her horse, Pilgrim, is also traumatized, to the point of becoming uncontrollable. In an attempt to heal both her daughter and the horse, Grace's mother Annie contacts Tom Booker (played by Robert Redford), a "Horse Whisperer". And the "game is afoot".

As I watched the movie over the holidays on one of those cable movie channels which likes to play a particular movie repeatedly for a week, it slowly dawned on me that I was watching a "post-modern discipleship tale". God really doesn't really come into the movie, although Annie and Grace are "taken aback" when the Booker family says grace over dinner (the scene is cute and well acted - everything is in their expressions). So this isn't a "spiritual" or Christian movie. If that bothers you, well, *"Build a bridge . . . and get over it"*. But it is a movie that offers us (if we are willing to accept them) some basic lessons on discipleship.

As the movie unfolds you soon realize that Tom Booker is not simply working with Pilgrim. In reality he is "discipling" the horse, the daughter and the mom, working to bring all three out of deep personal woundedness and confusion and into a place of healing and a new perspective on life and what's really important. We discover that it isn't just about the horse. It's about the circle of influence of everyone around the horse. And there's our first lesson on discipleship from *The Horse Whisperer*. Discipleship is never simply about us. Why? Because our discipleship eventually affects everyone around us. As God touches us and changes us, He in turn begins to touch and change those around us whom we touch. It's the "ripple effect" of our discipleship.

The discipleship relationship begins with the first phone call from Annie to Tom Booker. *"I read an article which said that you help people with their horse problems,"* says Annie. *"Truth is, I help horses with people problems,"* Booker replies. The first lesson we learn is a lesson on perspective. Perspective is a funny thing. For example, Jesus didn't come to earth to appease an angry God. He came to earth to redeem fallen and rebellious men. In other words, Jesus doesn't help God with people problems; He helps people with God problems. Discipleship isn't about changing God's attitude toward us; it's about changing our attitudes toward God.

The second lesson is about relationships and gifts. For any relationship to succeed you need to know who

you are in relation to the other person. This involves knowing both who you are and what you've been called & gifted to do. It means knowing both your strengths and your limitations. It means not allowing other people's misconceptions to determine who you are, what your gifts are, or what you've been called to do. In this respect, the journey of discipleship is a journey of self-awareness - coming to an authentic knowledge of who we are and where we fit in the Kingdom of God.

The lessons come quickly at this point in the movie. When Booker finally sees Pilgrim for the first time he reluctantly agrees to help, on the condition that the despondent and withdrawn Grace takes part in the process. *"You have a problem with that,"* Booker asks Grace. *"Isn't it obvious,"* Grace replies. *"Not to me,"* says Booker. *"You're either in or your out."* When Annie tries to intervene, Booker cuts her off, *"With all due respect, this is Grace's decision."* Grace's response is non-committal. *"There's nothing better to do around here,"* a seemingly detached Grace responds. *"That's not good enough,"* Booker retorts. The scene ends with Grace coming to terms with what she must do. There's a discipleship lesson and principle here. You can't disciple someone who doesn't want to be disciplined. And no one else can make that decision for you. Grace must agree to be involved. *"There's nothing better to do around here"* wasn't a sufficient answer. When Jesus first called His disciples He didn't ask them if they were busy, or if they had other things to do. And they didn't respond to His call by saying, *"Well, I'm bored and I've got some time on my hands, so, sure. Why not."* The call to discipleship is a call to make a conscious choice to re-orient our lives and decide what is important and what is not. I fear that much of contemporary Christianity is made up of people who "prayed a prayer" but who never made a conscious choice to re-orient their lives. They are *"The Church Of 'I've Got Nothing Better To Do'"*. And that isn't good enough.

About an hour into the movie there's a scene where the horse, Pilgrim (hmm, aren't all disciples "pilgrims"), bolts, knocking Booker to the ground, and escapes, running into a nearby meadow. Tom Booker follows Pilgrim into the meadow. There he sits in the meadow at a distance and simply waits. The two stare at each other from a comfortable distance. It goes on all day and into the evening. Booker waits for the horse to come to him. Finally, Pilgrim approaches Booker on his own terms and the two walk back together. Sometimes discipleship is like that, especially if you are working with deeply wounded people. You pursue them, but at a comfortable distance. You simply have to wait for them to come on their terms. Discipleship is often about healing and overcoming our woundedness. It's about learning to trust those who disciple us, while all the time, like Pilgrim, our "body language" says "stay away from me".

In another scene Tom Booker lassos Pilgrim. When the horse calms down he approaches Booker who removes his gloves, drops his coil of rope and kneels down. Gently pulling down on the lasso around Pilgrim's neck, the horse gradually lowers his head and Booker gently removes the lasso and caresses the horse's head. The two have now come to terms, and Pilgrim now "trusts" him. Pilgrim is in the process of "surrender". I found a Tom Booker quote which I assume is from the 1995 book that the movies is based on. I don't think the quote appears anywhere in the movie. As a result, I don't know where the following quote fits, so I'm placing it here. Here's what Booker says about surrender.

"Sometimes what seems like surrender isn't surrender at all. It's about what's going on in our hearts. About seeing clearly the way life is and accepting it and being true to it, whatever the pain, because the pain of not being true to it is far, far greater."

Discipleship is all about "surrender," or to use a more "biblical" word, "submission". Discipleship is the process by which God transforms our hearts and brings our will in complete "surrender" or "submission" to His will. It is through our submission to God's good and perfect will that we begin to see clearly the way life is, the way God intends it to be. Discipleship is that surrender by which we accept God's will and make a choice to be true to it, because the pain of not being true to His will is far, far greater.

In one scene it's roping and branding time for young calves, and Annie and Grace help out. Toward the end of the scene, Booker approaches Grace, *"You did real good out there today. So I think it's time that you started earning your keep around here"*. He proceeds to assign her chores around the ranch. *"Think you can handle it,"* Tom asks Grace. *"That isn't a question, is it?"* she responds. Funny how in our walk of discipleship God asks us questions which are not really questions at all. *"Do you trust Me,"* isn't a question God asks. It's a call to faith that He challenges us with. Divine questions are never intended to gather information.

"Take a ride with me," Tom says to Grace in another scene. Much to her surprise, Booker promptly places Grace in the driver's seat of a pickup truck. They get off to a fitful start. *"I don't think I can,"* says a fearful Grace. *"It isn't a question of whether or not you can,"* replies Booker. *"You are"*. Life & discipleship are often like that. Most things God calls us to do aren't built around what we think we can or can not do. God simply orchestrates a circumstance and calls us to obey, regardless of what we think we can or cannot do. The scene ends with Tom and Grace sitting on the back of the truck, overlooking a meadow, and talking about life. Discipleship is like that. Discipleship is time spent together; talking, exploring, questioning. Discipleship is about coming to terms and dealing with the deep wounds of our lives, unpacking the baggage of our lives that prevents us from pursuing a deeper walk of discipleship into the Kingdom of God.

O.K., there's a lot more to this movie that I'm skipping over due to time constraints. You really should watch it for yourself. The climax of the movie comes when it is time for Grace to ride Pilgrim again. When Pilgrim refuses to allow Grace to mount him, Tom has to try something new. He ties Pilgrim's left front leg up so that he cannot use it, making Pilgrim effectively lame. Tom forces the horse into submission and finally Pilgrim lays down in complete surrender with Booker beside him. Booker calls to Grace, *"Grace, this is where you come in. I want you to get down here. Grace, I want you to sit next to me. Trust me just one more time. Come over here next to me. I want you to stroke and rub him all over. We're going to show Pilgrim how to help you ride him. There comes a point where I'm not needed anymore. And we're at that point."* It is a powerful and moving moment that needs to be seen to be fully appreciated.

One of the hidden dangers of discipleship is to create "co-dependency" between a disciple and a teacher. The challenge of discipleship is to know when to acknowledge that "there comes a point where I'm not needed anymore. And we're at that point."

Conclusion

O.K., time to wrap up this "discipleship rodeo" (Sorry, couldn't resist. "Bad dog, bad dog. Stop that!"). In my opinion (for what it's worth) much of what passes for "discipleship" in Western Christianity appears to be little more than "education" - the transfer of information. This approach is epitomized by the "discipleship class" or "discipleship curriculum". The operating philosophy here seems to be "knowledge=discipleship". In other words, once you know everything I know, you'll be a disciple (complete with a diploma or certificate to prove it). This really shouldn't come as any surprise when we reflect on the heavy emphasis placed upon the gift and role of teaching in Western Churches, most of which are "pastored" by "teachers" (i.e., someone with the 5-Fold gift of a Teacher as opposed to the gift of a Pastor. The strength of a teacher is his gift/ability to teach. His (or her) drawback is that a teacher has never met a problem or challenge that couldn't be solved or met with more teaching. The problem here, as it applies to New Testament discipleship, is that biblical discipleship is not so much "educational" as it is "relational". It's more "take a ride with me" than it is "meet me in class with your lesson done". The ride and the conversation IS the lesson. The promise and potential of the simple church or house church movement is the opportunity we have to restore discipleship as a relationship as opposed to an "educational program".