



11th Sunday After Pentecost

August 8, 2021

“Wanna Be Fierce”

Scriptural Reference; 1 Kings 19:4-8, Ephesians 4:25-5:2
John 6:35, 41-51

Greetings Saints! Mona and I and the Family are so excited to be back with you this morning here at All Saints. We had the most amazing trip to Montana to visit family and friends, and we deeply appreciate the time. We want to thank our Worship Team and Music Team for doing such a spectacular job while we were away...especially Donna Greene for preaching and presiding, Martha Stephenson for her inspiring homily ...and our beloved Father Ed Rouffy for doing such a great job presiding last Sunday.

All kinds of good things happened in Montana on this trip, but one of my favorites was that we were able to baptize 6 children into our community of faith at St. Peter's Cathedral last Saturday. It was quite a day.

Ok, Saints I have a confession to make. In addition to the amazing Baptisms that happened, something else amazing happened in Montana...Mona and I won at the horse races. On the first Sunday we were away, when you all were praying Morning Prayer with Donna presiding and Martha preaching...Mona and I and a bunch of family were in Great Falls for the Horse Races at the Montana State Fair. In

fact, I have the racing form right here. Horse Racing is deeply rooted in both Montana's indigenous and ranching cultures, and Mona and I have always been fans. I can remember many summer Sunday afternoons at the track in Helena, or Great Falls, watching the ponies run with Granma Dorothy and Mona. With many of horses being ridden to victory by members of the Birdrattler Family, one of the premier family of jockey's ever. With Shance, Richard or Joseph Birdrattler in the saddle, their horses were pretty much assured to finish "in the money." Sunday was quite a day: warm sunny day, fast track and Mona and I ended up winning on 4 out of 5 races. Not because we have any particular expertise in picking a winning horse, but because our relative, Cliff Dennis is one of the premier horse trainers in the Western United States. And four of Cliff's horses were running that day, all four with the Birdrattlers in the saddles. So today, Saints I want to share a story with you about a special horse that Cliff brought to Great Falls that day, in today's message entitled: "Wanna Be Fierce."

I learned the story of this amazing horse, Wanna Be Fierce, while Cliff, Brother Alan and I were sitting quietly beside the grandstand between races. Wanna Be Fierce was scheduled to run in the 4th race of the day and Cliff started to share his story. It seems that Wanna Be Fierce, was indeed that...fierce...starting his racing career as a strong barrel racing Quarter Horse. In barrel racing the horse runs in the same cloverleaf pattern of 3 barrels over and over, with the barrels 60 feet apart with the final 90-foot sprint to the finish line. Over and over, circle after circle, cloverleaf after cloverleaf...nothing changing...always the same pattern...repeated and repeated and repeated. Barrel racing horses are jerked and pulled and yanked...coaxed and cajoled around barrel after barrel...event after event, rodeo after rodeo, year after year. Same barrels...different day. And Wanna Be Fierce was an excellent barrel racer, a champion if fact...Pendleton, Calgary, Laramie. Winning gold buckles for the riders and some extra hay in the stall for him.

And then one day, Cliff said, it appears that Wanna Be Fierce had had enough of barrel racing and simply stopped running in circles. Could not, would not be jerked, pulled, yanked, coaxed or cajoled around one more barrel...not one. Wanna Be Fierce bucked and snorted and stomped and reared...and apparently Cliff said, Wanna Be Fierce had apparently decided that he was done circling barrels for good. Wanna Be Fierce's owner was pretty much ready to give up on the horse when Cliff came into the picture and asked if perhaps, he could work with Wanna Be Fierce some and see what might happen. And that's when the most amazing things did happen.

Cliff brought Wanna Be Fierce into the arena where the barrels were arranged in their usual order, and the horse would have none of it. Reared, kicked and jerked the reins from Cliff's hand, jumped the fence and was off like a lightning bolt. And Wanna Be Fierce ran and ran and ran until he couldn't run any more. While Wanna Be Fierce was done running in circles, apparently, he was not done running in a straight line. Cliff tracked the horse down, calmed him down and brought him back, not the barrel arena but to the track...that long, half-mile sweep of open turf. Cliff swapped saddles, and with one of the Birdrattler brothers on board, turned Wanna Be Fierce loose to see what he could do. And Wanna Be Fierce ran fast, and hard and straight and then ran some more...and hasn't stopped yet. Breaking Track record after track record...win after win after win. And it was the same on Sunday, 4th race at Great Falls. Wanna Be Fierce left the gate and just flew...mane and tail in the wind...and Shance Bird Rattler hanging on and simply guiding the pony home.

As the story unfolded, I asked Cliff what he thought was going on with Wanna Be Fierce...and Cliff said something simple yet pretty profound, "You know Joe, sometimes you just decide to stop running in circles; stop "running around" and just decide to start running a different way.

You know...straight.... toward something or someone. Horses and people are a lot alike sometimes.” Indeed, they are Cliff, indeed they are.

And the more I thought about it Saints, the more I realized how right Cliff and Wanna Be Fierce were. You know how sometimes we run our lives in that circle, that cloverleaf like the barrel race, getting pulled this way and that way, letting other people, other things control the reins, control the direction. We follow the same old paths and directions over and over, cutting corners so close, dancing with danger...touching but not tipping the barrels and sometimes, yes, running them over completely or crushing them outright. We run, circling fame, wealth, power, our addictions, our bad choices, our prejudices and hatred ...circling day after day...and wondering why our path always winds up in the same place. Same barrels, different day. Same arena, different day. Same rodeo different day.

And then one day, like Wanna Be Fierce, we decide...yes...*we decide* to do it differently. No more circles, no more barrels, no more cutting corners, no more being yanked and pulled around every turn. No more! We say...we shout...or perhaps we whisper, “If I have any more run left in me it will be straight and true and as fast and hard as I can run!” Just like Wanna Be Fierce. And where to we run? Yes, Wanna Be Fierce and us we run to the same place.... into the open, to freedom, to the Wind, to the light and, I think, into the loving presence of our Creator who has been waiting for us all along. Waiting for us go give up the chase, to stop circling and to start running true, running free, running home.

Today’s Sacred Stories are all about that decision.... the decision to stop running in circles, the decision to change direction...the decision to live differently.

In 1Kings we see Elijah, spent and collapsed under the shade of a broom tree, ready to give up completely. Ready to die. Scared to death...We read of his being saved by the angel with bread and water...giving him new strength and power to head straight back into the wilderness for 40

day and nights until he meets his God face to face on Mount Horeb. But why was Elijah on the run in the first place? Like Paul Harvey...here's the rest of the story.

We are about 1000 years before the birth of Jesus in about 970 BCE. King David's reign has concluded, and King Solomon and King Ahab are ascending to power. Israel is not a divided kingdom with Israel in the north and Judah in the south. The Jewish people are losing confidence in the God of their Ancestors, and have turned to worshiping the god Baal, including King Ahab...who had named Elijah, "The troubler of Israel". Elijah challenges King Ahab, his woman Jezebel and 450 priests of Baal to basically a duel, a showdown, a contest...not at the racetrack, but on Mount Carmel. (describe the event on Mt. Carmel).

And there is Elijah, like Wanna Be Fierce, challenging the people of Israel to stop running in circles around Baal, and to run straight and true into the waiting presence of their God. And with the Spirit's help guidance and yes...sacred sustenance of bread of heaven, Elijah can continue, renewed and unafraid to meet his God on the mountain.

We hear Paul's letter to the Ephesians this morning Saints, and it is all about stopping our run around the barrels and deciding to run a different way.

Put away false hood – Speak the truth to our neighbors for we are all of one another.

Do not let the sun go down on your anger.

Give up stealing, work honestly and share something with the needy ones.

Let no evil talk come from out of our mouths. Speak what is useful for building up and give grace to those who hear.

Put away your bitterness, wrath, anger, wrangling, slander and malice.

Stop circling...and run a different way, “be kind to one another, tenderhearted and forgiving of one another. Be imitators of Jesus live in love as Jesus has loved us.”

Wanna Be Fierce, Elijah, Paul... all challenging us to decide to run in a new way.

And then in today’s Gospel we have Jesus...imploring us to be in relationship with him. I am the Bread of Life. Jesus is compelling us...don’t just do what I did or follow what I taught. Not enough! I want more! I do not want a casual relationship, or a companionship, or some convenient acquaintance. Jesus is challenging us to change, to stop circling...Jesus is calling us to “consume” him, and to be consumed by him in return. To literally make him Jesus a part of us in body, soul and spirit. Jesus is calling us, “Let me become a part of you, deep, intimate, loving.” Stop circling the barrels of *I want* and *I need*. But run a different way...loving and committed and surrendering to what Jesus has in store.

Decide and then run straight and fast and hard.

Wanna Be Fierce, Elijah, Paul, Jesus...you were right, Cliff. Horses and people are a lot alike. Amen.