

# The Park Road Pulpit

*Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church*

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## *On Taming Jesus*

Hebrews 4.12-13, Mark 10.17-31

Russ Dean, October 15, 2006



It was an odd posture, standing face to face with such a large and beautiful creature. But it was there, looking into their eyes, standing quietly, (whispering?), that the eighteenth century Irish horseman, Daniel Sullivan, did his best work. The Irishman was mysterious, with the seeming ability to know these animals, to communicate with them – how else could a man could rehabilitate even the most traumatized horses? Sullivan, who died in 1810, was the first of the “Horse Whisperers,” those persons gifted with the ability to tame a horse, wild from birth, or made intractable by abuse or mishap. His secrets were passed to Willis Powell and J.S. Rarey, who recorded his techniques for fear that Sullivan’s secrets would die with them.<sup>1</sup> The 1998 Robert Redford movie, “The Horse Whisperer” follows the work of those who have learned to speak to the powers within the soul of a horse.

There is a stirring scene in the movie in which Redford’s character, Tom Booker, speaks with a wild horse, and in quiet choreography slowly, but confidently brings the animal to his knees. It is a powerful scene, meant to instill awe, in the ability of the Whisperer. It is awesome. But there is also an eerie sadness in watching the wildness drain, finally, from such a beautiful and untamed animal. The moment is also awful. In

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<sup>1</sup> This information is from the entry for “Willis J. Powell,” in the online encyclopedia called “Wikipedia” ([www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)). Some question the accuracy of the entries contained in Wikipedia, as they are voluntarily submitted, and not necessarily checked for accuracy by any so-called “expert” in the field. I have not sought to further validate this information. Their book was entitled, *Tachyhippodamia; on The New Secret of Taming Horses*, which led me to comment to my congregation that I should have called the sermon: “Tachychristodamia: On The Taming of a Wild Jesus.”

that moment, the domesticated animal becomes a shadow of its former self. The power and majesty, true in its wildness, is lost forever in its domesticated form.

We have done the same thing to Jesus.

Ever so quietly, but powerfully, awesomely and awfully, we have brought him to his knees. Tamed his passions. Domesticated his radical agenda. Turned his cross into a trinket, a gold-plated pretty, to adorn our superstitions and dress our prejudices. We have sentimentalized his stories, spiritualized his ethics, romanticized his death. Jesus of Nazareth was a wild beauty, whose revolutionary ideas caused the power of Rome to tremble in fear. Jesus, the itinerant rabbi, was a wild fanatic, whose radical ideals caused the power of the Jewish establishment to shudder in self-righteousness. I don't think it would be hyperbole to suggest that if the story were set in America today, it would be Dick Cheney and Jerry Falwell meeting behind closed doors, to plot his assassination.<sup>2</sup>

Several years ago a couple had visited with us a good many times – so much so that we had begun to expect them to join the church. But one Sunday morning as they walked out of the door, something was obviously wrong. I could see it in his face, which was, literally, ashen in complexion. He looked quite ill. Normally-jovial, the man could hardly make eye contact, and he did not speak as they passed. They have not darkened

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<sup>2</sup> This statement is not specifically meant to incriminate either of these men, but one of the points of today's sermon is to note how little we understand the radical nature of Jesus – and for Pontius Pilate and the High Priest of Jerusalem to be involved in the plot indicate just how “wild” and dangerous he was. Since most people have little conceptualization of how powerful Rome was, or how powerful and influential was the Jewish establishment in first-century Palestine, I simply thought a comparison might be helpful.

the door since. A brief email explained that I had crossed a line that morning, breaching some barrier of propriety or acceptability (that is still inexplicable to me).<sup>3</sup>

Now, I'm not comparing myself to Jesus, but this was the kind of effect he had on many. Of course, Jesus was life-changing for a small band. A few left jobs, went AWOL from families, walked away from inheritances and security, transgressed the line separating keepers of the status quo from all the others. But not many. And Jesus' teaching and his touch gave hope to a few dozen others – lepers, the blind, the lame, yes, a few were given strength. But in the grand scheme of things, these were few and far between. Multitudes came. A few were changed. The rest went home curious or confused or confounded by his strange sayings and his uncompromising Way.<sup>4</sup> And he had that ashen-faced effect, that offensive, relationship-ending effect, on more than a few others.

I think that we no longer can see that Jesus – can no longer know who he really was. We have lost sight of his truly radical agenda. I don't know if it is possible for the American Church to regain it. Due to the inertia that comes to individuals, we have sanded down his rough edges for our comfort. Due to the self-protectionism and self-centeredness that comes to institutions, we have immersed his radical Way in a baptism that comes to all religious movements that enjoy a majority status. Perhaps there are no greater ironies to be found than those which surround his life: that one who so disdained

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<sup>3</sup> The sermon, "One World Is Enough – The Eugenics of Christian Community" (09/09/01), is hardly what I consider radical. I honestly have no idea how/why it could be so offensive to anyone!

<sup>4</sup> I am not underestimating the effect Jesus had on his world, nor on all of history to follow. Yet we tend to read with a sentimentalized notion of a "gentle Jesus, meek and mild" – the Sunday school pictures with which we were raised – thinking that Jesus, who changed the world, changed the multitudes. But, there is no biblical evidence this was the case. In every setting, more turned away than followed, and in the end, nearly all turned away. We underestimate the offensive nature of his message. If we are perfectly honest with what we read and know about him, I think it is fair to say that most people now (as then), would not "like" Jesus.

the place of religious pomp and the outward expressions of piety is the head of the Roman Catholic Church!<sup>5</sup> That the one who had *no place to lay his head* (Luke 9.58), whose love was for the last and the least, the dispossessed, the orphan, the widow, the foreigner, is almost synonymous with the greatest economic power the world has ever known! That the one who laid down his life, whose humiliating death is the key to understanding his life, his teaching, his power – this same, crucified savior, has been lifted by Kings and Generals and Presidents for seventeen centuries as their leader in battle, their supreme warrior against all infidels!<sup>6</sup>

The Church has tamed the wildness out of Jesus. We have domesticated him for our purposes. And then we have done even worse. We have made him to do our evil bidding for us.

Walter Wink says “If Jesus had never lived, we would not have been able to invent him.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, he was too radical for even a wild imagination! According to Wink, virtually every word of Jesus, as recorded in our Bible, is a judgment on what he calls the “Domination System.” This system is the Power

characterize[d] by unjust economic relations, oppressive political relations, biased race relations, patriarchal gender relations, hierarchical power relations, and the use of violence to maintain them all...<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> I have no specific disregard for the Roman Catholic Church – I take my shots at the rest of us later! It is simply ironic to me that the Roman church could be so ceremonial, when Jesus himself had no evidentiary interest in such – and, in keeping with the Hebrew prophets with whom he is often compared, I am guessing that Jesus was not short on critique of his own ceremonial church (see Amos 5.21 and following, “*I hate, I despise your festivals...*”).

<sup>6</sup> The seventeen centuries is a reference to the conversion of the emperor, Constantine, in the early fourth century, CE. Until this time, Christianity existed as a marginalized sect, a “cult,” without legitimacy. With Constantine’s conversion, however, a marriage between State and Church was complete – and we have been troubled by this relationship ever since.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be*, p.81.

<sup>8</sup> Wink, p.42. “...No one person or group of people imposed the Domination System on us; it came wholly uninvited. People simply stumbled into a struggle for power beyond their ability to avoid it or to stop.”

This Domination System represents nearly everything we have come to believe about governments, nations, human relations – it is our very way of life! If Wink is right, then, every single thing Jesus said stands in judgment of this system – and, thus, of our very way of life!

And “the System” doesn’t take kindly to meddlers. The System only knows two options: Tame them. Or kill them. Ask Rachel Corrie, the 23-year-old American woman crushed to death in 2003, when she tried to stop the destruction of a Palestinian civilian home in the Gaza strip. Ask Martin Luther King, Jr, who tried to put an end to the racist policies of American institutional life. Ask Jesus.

No where is the reality of the Domination System more obvious, no where is it more personal to you and me, and no where is it more destructive, than in our economic relations. The man wanted eternal life. Jesus told him, plain and simple, how he could have it. If the Church really listened to Jesus, the Church would be a small enterprise. For most of us would be *shocked... perplexed... astounded* by the wild foolishness of almost everything Jesus said. And most of us would simply walk away. For my money is my money. I’ve worked hard for it. And if I just gave it all to the poor, most of them would be poor again in no time. (You’ve heard these justifications before have you?)

So we’ve tamed Jesus by convincing ourselves this wasn’t really what he said. How often have you heard, “...now, what Jesus was really saying...” In other words, since we don’t like what Jesus said, let me tell you another way to think about this! Some have noted, for example, that camel, in Greek, is one letter away from the word for rope. So, “some scribe probably mistranslated – Jesus was really saying, ‘it’s difficult... like

putting a rope through a needle...’ by not completely impossible (like putting a camel through!).” Others have commented on a small door, built in the ninth century in the Church of the Holy Nativity in Bethlehem. This door, which I have seen, was built to be about half as high as a regular door, to keep invading armies (and their horses) out. The door, which is called “the eye of the needle,” was so low that a camel would have to kneel to come in. So, again, it’s difficult to come in, but if a camel really wanted to, it could get in. So with the rich... Finally, others have said, “This was what Jesus really said to the rich ruler... but this was because Jesus knew what was in his heart...” (He had a problem with his money... But we’re not like the rich young ruler, etc...)

I think Jesus said to the man: get rid of your money, because money will keep you from understanding what the Kingdom is all about. I think there is a very good chance that Jesus, if he were here today, would say the very same thing to nearly every one of us.

We cannot tame Jesus. His wild calling is there for all who dare to hear. Those few, Christian and otherwise (dare I say!), who catch the wild gleam in Jesus’ eye and are willing to speak truth to power will continue to speak the *Living Word* (Hebrews 4.12) that our world needs to hear. We need that wild Word in the world. And it is my prayer, today, that as a congregation, we would be more and more willing to listen for it, to catch a glimpse of what Jesus really did said, to what and to whom he really does calls us, that we would be diligent and honest enough to be *shocked... perplexed... astounded...* by all that he says... and that we would follow, anyway!

May it be so!