

## “STUCK”

Luke 15:13-19; Galatians 5:1

July 4, 2010

We’ve all likely heard the phrase, “Pride goes before the fall,” and some might even recognize it as a Biblical quote. But do you know where it comes from? And are aware of the full wording of the quote? It’s from Proverbs 16:18, which says, “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.” Whether we use the full verse or the Reader’s Digest



condensed version, the meaning is the same – if we get all puffed up in the head about something, it’s likely that we’re not too far removed from a pin that will suddenly and painfully burst our bubble. The Biblical story of the prodigal son echoes this message quite clearly, as does a message from our resident theologian for the summer, Dr. Seuss.

Dr. Seuss tells a striking tale of pride and its fall in his book *The Zax*. In this story, there are two kinds of Zaxes: North-going Zaxes and South-going Zaxes. As little Zaxes growing up, North-going Zaxes go to North-going school to learn how to go north – and only north. South-going Zaxes go to South-going school to learn...that’s right – how to go south – and only south. The truth is that all Zaxes are quite capable of going any direction – north, south, east, west, northeast, southwest, north and three-quarters, west and an eighth. However, because of their training, their minds are made up on what is the right way, and there will be no budging. They’re stuck in their ways.

One day (and you just knew that this day would come...especially in the world of Dr. Seuss!), a North-going Zax and a South-going Zax meet head-on. And because neither of them is willing to deviate from their own way of thinking, or to change their own personal tradition, they find themselves stuck. I could tell you the story, but instead let’s watch it (**video clip was shown**).

We see a clip like this and we laugh – because it looks so ridiculous to us. But is it really that ridiculous? Or is our laughter masking what we know to be true – that these two cartoon characters are more like us than we care to admit? We get set in our ways. We have a tendency to think that we know better than anyone else. For some of us, it’s not even “My way or the highway...” it’s “My way or no way at all.” The truth is we will always have trouble growing as individuals and as a church if we are unwilling to change – unwilling to budge – unwilling to consider that perhaps someone else has a better idea about what to do or how to do it.

In the greater society we see Zax-like thinking dominating our political system. Look at the hot-button topics of today – health care, climate change, immigration, war, same-sex marriage, offshore drilling, and the list goes on – and one of the main reasons our country fails to make adequate headway on any of these topics is because left-moving Democrats and right-moving Republicans are standing face-to-face...stuck...both refusing to move even an inch in either direction.

The story of the prodigal son provides us with a Biblical example of what I'm talking about. The younger son in the story approaches his father, asking for his share of the inheritance. There is no indication that the father has been anything less than a good father. And so for all intents and purposes, the younger son's request could be seen as him considering that his father was dead. The young son wants his independence. He's tired of working on the family farm, he's tired of someone else telling him when he needs to wake up in the morning and when to go to bed at night, he's tired of playing the role of the good, obedient son. His pride has convinced him that he doesn't need anyone – especially his father – to find his way in the world. He can make it on his own.

But life, as it often does, dishes up a big dose of reality. His frivolous spending and wayward ways of life soon catch up to him, and he finds himself broke and unemployed. Knowing that he can't survive long without money, he takes a job – a job that he probably felt was beneath him, but a job nonetheless.

After working and eating and living with pigs for a time, the young son comes to his senses. He swallows his pride, writes and rehearses the speech he'll give his father when he returns, and he begins the journey home. The young son, though, doesn't have to give that speech. When his father spots him on the road in the distance, he runs out to meet him. Showing great grace, the father throws his arms around his son, orders his servants to clothe him in clean, new clothes, and organizes a party.

But now the pride of the older son kicks in. When he hears the music and learns that it's for his wayward brother, he gets angry and storms off. The older brother's pride was prompting him to say, "I told you so. You were wrong." Breaking the grip of pride, however, entails not worrying about who was right or who was wrong. Putting the past behind and embracing the freshness of a brand new start overpower any thoughts or ideas we have of keeping score. And if we don't keep score, we're free to see things in a win-win sort of way.

Today is Independence Day, the day on which we celebrate our freedom as a country. For a little over 200 years, the people of the United States of America have enjoyed some basic freedoms, including the freedom of religion. But Christians have been living as a free people for far longer than that. The apostle Paul wrote in Galatians 5:1, "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." For freedom, Christ has set us free. It's not something he had to do – it's something that, through the cross, he chose to do. But now we have a choice – continue living burdened by sin, enslaved by pride, or live as the free people Christ gifted us to be. Christ has set us free...let us live free!

The story of the Zax, unlike most other Dr. Seuss stories, does not have a happy ending. If you noticed at the end of the video clip, a whole world gets built around the North-going and South-going Zaxes – a world with cars and buildings and bridges – a world filled with opportunities and possibilities. Because they have failed to move, the world has moved in on them and around them. Now they find that their options are even more limited – their pride has hardened, and they're stuck.

We know from our faith that God is not a God who keeps score. Like the father in the story of the prodigal son, God is not concerned about how the money was spent or just how dissolute his living had been. God is just happy that we're home. We should never let pride stand in the way of returning to God – we should never feel so burdened by our sin that we can't come to Jesus.

That's the message we hear in preparing for Holy Communion. The Biblical story reminds us that "on the night he was betrayed, Jesus took bread and he broke it, and he passed it to his disciples saying, 'Take, eat, this is my body which is broken for you.'" We would be wise to remember who these Last Supper "guests" of Jesus were – they included Judas, the one who was about to betray Jesus, and Peter, the one who would deny him three times. Jesus knew this – he even pointed it out to them – yet he still freely shared the bread and the cup with them. Nothing should stand in our way of receiving the grace that is offered to us today through the bread and the cup.

Don't let pride stand in the way of coming before Jesus and accepting what he freely offers. There is never a better time than right now to reach out and accept God's free gift of grace – after all, the only other option is to stuck in the desert for fifty-nine years, face-to-face with a Zax. AMEN.