

Greetings, U Hill!

In our household, we have a scripture reading as part of our morning routine. A couple of weeks ago a passage came up that I've been thinking about ever since. We were reading Acts 26:12-18, in which Paul tells his conversion story, one more time. This is the third time in Acts that we get the story. Perhaps because of that, I wasn't giving the reading quite the attention that it deserved. Until it took a surprising turn. Right in the middle of it, Paul tells us something this time that he hadn't mentioned before, which is so surprising and unexpected (having heard about the whole Damascus episode twice already), that we all started laughing. I'm not precisely sure why--and in fairness, I started giggling, and then I infected the rest of them.

It comes when Jesus says, "Why are you persecuting me?"--which we've heard before--and then, "It hurts you to kick against the goads." Well that's new. And as such, besides laughing, we got kind of fixated on it. When something catches us off guard in Scripture, then that's usually a good teaching moment.

First of all, we had no idea what this lovely little first-century colloquialism means.

It's an image, though not an especially flattering one. A goad was a sharpened switch, used to keep oxen heading in the right path. (Let's just note that Jesus is calling Paul an ox. So much for Jesus meek and mild.) But what would happen is that the oxen wouldn't want to go in the direction the driver wanted them to go, and they would kick back at the directing switch. And when they did, it would be more painful. Probably it wasn't really painful in the first place, just annoying; but when the animal kicked at it, sometimes it would pierce the skin. And so: it hurt to kick against the goad.

Again, this is not the most delicate image, but it got me thinking about a very real spiritual reality, which is that when we "kick" against where God wants us to go, where Jesus is leading and the Holy Spirit prompting, we invariably do ourselves more harm than good. I do not want to suggest that if things are going poorly right now, it's necessarily because of some spiritual rebellion. But I do know what it's like pushing back against what God wants me to do, what I hear in prayer and scripture that I ought to do, as a follower of Jesus. And I have yet to have the experience that I was right and God was wrong. I'm not holding my breath for that day...

I simply offer this as something for your reflection and prayer. It leads me to think about what's been called, "praying with open hands." In other words, praying open to what God wants for us (which is always and only our best), and not clinging to things that keep us in another

path, or even separated from the fullness of God's love for us (which is immeasurably deep, high, wide and long [Ephesians 3]). It's a risky, but--in the end--always rewarding adventure to pray openly and honestly, asking God what you need to let go of, or what you need to take on, in order to really receive the fullness of life that Jesus came to bring (John 10:10).

In the hope, peace, joy and love of Christ,

Aaron