

Preposterous! **(The “Stuck” Christian)**

3rd in the series:

Christus Paradox: Oxymorons for Christian Living

Should we continue in sin IN ORDER that grace may abound?

By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?

(Romans 6:1b-2)

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the 16th Sunday after Pentecost, **September 24, 2017**

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Christ of the Hills UMC, 700 Balearic Drive, Hot Springs Village, Arkansas 71909

Today’s message is the third in a series of five I’m calling *Christus Paradox*. *Christus* is, of course, Christ, whose very existence is the ultimate paradox, he who is both Divine and Human, Alpha and Omega, Beginning and End, First and Last. This Christ is both the sacrificial Lamb of God and the coming Lion of the Tribe of Judah.

Jesus often taught using paradox, his sayings taking on an oxymoronical quality. I advertised the series with one of the most obvious examples, “*Take my yoke upon you,*” he said, “*for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*” *Easy yoke. Light burden.* These are obvious oxymorons on a par with Jumbo Shrimp, Icy Hot, Original Copy, Pretty Ugly, Clearly Confused.

Oxymoronical sayings can be fun, and I’ve had fun with them, offering a few examples each Sunday. Let me add a few to our portfolio. Margaret Mead said, “*Always remember that you are absolutely unique. Just like everyone else.*” And, Isaac Singer, “*We have to believe in free will. We’ve got no other choice.*” Then there’s Jack Benny, “*Modesty is my best quality.*” And Bob Hope, “*A bank is a place that will lend you money if you can prove you don’t need it.*” And lastly, food writer Calvin Trillin wrote, “*Health food makes me sick.*”

As fun as oxymorons can be, they can be so much more, inviting reflection and beckoning us to ponder mysteries. I’ve shared with you two of the most famous examples from Jesus’ teachings, “*The first shall be last and the last shall be first,*” and “*the one who seeks his life will lose it and whoever loses it for my sake will find it.*” This morning I add a third, from Mark 9, the story of a man seeking healing for his son. When Jesus said, “*All things are possible to the one who believes,*” the man replied in words I regard as one of the most powerfully relevant expressions of the New Testament (especially in the beautiful language of the King James Version), “*I believe, help thou mine unbelief.*” Here is one weighing contradictory impulses within, exposing the deeper struggles of the heart and soul.

That man's response to Jesus will serve, I think, as intro to today's theme, but let's quickly review how we arrived here, for our path has not been haphazard. My first message, *Footprints of an Unseen Hand*, spoke to the Christian person's most fundamental characteristic, faith in God. There is no Christianity without faith. Our foundation is belief in God, not as a disinterested deity, an impersonal, distant cosmic force. The Christian believes in a personal God interested in the lives of his creatures. The Christian's first impulse is that God has come to us in history through Jesus Christ and that God loves ME and has a plan for MY life.

Last Sunday my second sermon, *Festina Lente* (Latin = *Hurry Slowly*) addressed our Christian experience, an acknowledgement that our disciple walk can become unsteady, obstacles to grace arising to trip us up and divert us from the path. How, then, should we proceed? How shall we re-align ourselves to God's purpose?

Festina Lente sought to point out how God has given us a gift – Sabbath – to help us re-align to a faithful disciple walk, an opportunity to slow down (*Lente*) on one day out of our hurried (*Festina*) week in order to refresh and re-enliven our faith through worship, prayer and praise, and reflection upon God's Word.

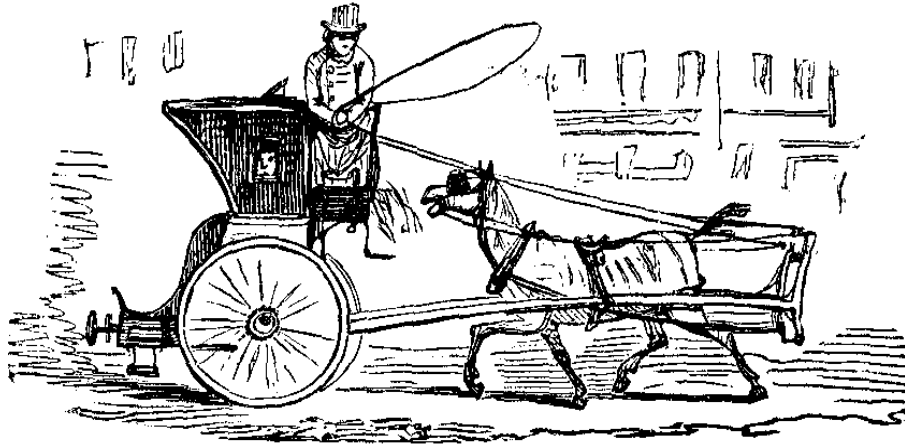
I suppose, then, that we could end the series there, but the fact is that no matter how many Sabbaths we experience, no matter how many worship services we attend and hymns we sing, no matter how many sermons we hear or sacraments we receive – we can feel ourselves stuck. We may have felt last Sunday like we're on a roll and yet return today knowing our need of a Sabbath rest to re-energize our faith.

I played in our United Methodist Men's golf tourney this Monday at Diamante. I was sure after the 18th hole in my previous game the week before that I had the game down pat. At last, I thought, the corrective measures have taken hold. But no, I was reminded at the driving range on Monday how truly stuck I am in what I call a power fade (others, less kind, may call it a slice). occasionally I have it corrected (seemingly always on the 18th hole, a clarion call to come back with confidence, and so I do but, alas my weakness resurfaces.

Preposterous, if you ask me!!! Which brings me to today's message. You may not recognize it, but my title – *Preposterous!* -- is an oxymoron all by itself! It's a Latin hybrid with fascinating etymology (you didn't know you knew so much Latin, did you?).

To be sure, we all know what *preposterous* means. If you describe something as *preposterous* you are declaring it *absurd, ridiculous*. Yes, but the reason for the absurdity was much more precise when Erasmus coined the term in the 16th century than our current usage of the word. It's made up of two components, both of which are common prefixes in English; "*pre*," *before*; and "*post*," *after*. *Pre-posterous*, then, describes a reversal of the *Before-After* situation.

Post (or its full form, *posterous*, in Latin), meant "*that which comes after*," "*that which is next*." Put it together and *Preposterous* literally meant, "*the before of what comes next*." It refers, then, to something out of order, something inverted, the old thing inserted into the new.



This image from an English dictionary in 1589 defines *Preposterous* as the act of “*setting the cart before the horse.*” What should be “*Pre*” is now “*Post.*”

Something *Preposterous*, then, is something out of order. Perhaps that’s

why two words in our text stood out for me this week. “*Should we continue in sin IN ORDER that grace may abound?*”

Let’s think this morning about the order of sin and grace. Christian theology is clear that *Grace* is God’s response to the *Sin* condition of his creatures. Grace is what comes next. So Paul poses an obvious question based on the reversal of this fundamental order. If *Grace* is *what comes next*, shall we continue to live in the *Before of What Comes Next*, in sin?

Paul’s answer? *Preposterous! By no means! May it never be!*

And yet, as *Preposterous* as it may be we all recognize how stuck we can be. Paul, in the next chapter (Romans 7), offers a glimpse into his inmost heart, confused at how *Preposterous* he finds his own behavior, confessing, “*I don’t understand my own actions, for I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.*” He couldn’t get rid of that slice!

Paul is confessing the *Preposterousness* of his own experience as a disciple of Christ that *Sin*, what should have been left behind, he seems not able to shake, not able to let it go. Or is it that IT won’t let him go?

Next Spring, during Lent, my Tuesday morning studies will be titled, *Addictions: Why do we embrace what is diminishing us?* Is it not *preposterous* that we would do so? There’s bewilderment on the part of family members who look at a loved one addicted to a substance or a behavior that is obviously detrimental and destructive. The addict himself or herself becomes bewildered and wonders at their own inability to change until they begin to wonder, “*Am I clutching it, or has it grown so powerful that it is clutching me?*” As expressed in the ballad of that dandy theologian Garth Brooks, “*Longneck bottle, let go of my hand.*” It’s a *Preposterous* image! The addict knows what should be next, wants would should be next, craves what should be next – freedom from my addiction. But what came before won’t let him go.

May I introduce you to a word used in psychology which describes being stuck in a certain behavior? *Perseveration* is a neurological condition of being stuck in a particular pattern, an involuntary repetition of a previous response or behavior. It can manifest itself in cases of brain trauma, including strokes, and it’s also a feature of autism. Perseveration is evidenced in the way

a patient answers a sequence of questions. Once the first question is answered all following questions receive the same response in a sequence of sameness famously seen in the 1988 film *Rain Man*, dealing with autism. A doctor asks Raymond, who is autistic, how much a candy bar costs. Dustin Hoffman, playing Raymond, responds, “*Bout a hundred dollars.*” The doctor continues, “*And what does one of those new compact cars cost?*” Raymond responds, with the same answer, “*Bout a hundred dollars.*” We recognize this as being *severed* from reality

To be sure, at some level *perseveration* has positive connotations. Consider a similar word you will know better, spelled almost the same but pronounced differently, *perseverance*.

Perseverance is that stick-to-it, don't quit attitude which is a positive trait essential to success.

The question then becomes, when does *perseverance* (a positive trait) become severed from reality, becoming *perseveration* and a feature of mental debilitation?

I was at Rotary this Thursday morning and W. C. Fields was quoted by a speaker. “*If at first you don't succeed, try, try again. Then quit. There's no point in being a damn fool about it.*” W. C. Fields was saying *perseverance* is healthy, but *perseveration* is not.

In the 1996 film, *Tin Cup*, Kevin Costner plays Roy McAvoy, a once-promising but now backwoods golf instructor from a dilapidated driving range who becomes a miracle entry into the U. S. Open. The climactic moment of the film is the 18th hole on the last day of the U. S. Open. Roy is in the lead and has an excellent opportunity to stun the world by actually winning the Open. His tee shot is perfect and all he needs to do is lay up for an easy 3rd shot into the Par 5 green in order to chalk up a U. S. Open victory.

Roy, though, never one to shy away from a challenge, knows he can go for all the glory. Why lay up when he knows he can hit that 2nd shot over the water protecting the green? So, against the advice of his caddie, to the shock of the announcers in the booth and the spectators, Roy chooses not to “*lay it up*” for a certain win, but rather to “*Grip it and Rip it,*” John Daly fashion. It's a sad spectacle when, after hitting the first shot into the water, Roy continues to play the same shot, hitting ball after ball after ball into the drink, until he's off the leader board and down to the last ball allowed by PGA rules before disqualification. Roy's *perseveration* had repeated a previous behavior to his detriment. Preposterous!!!

In that preposterous scene we learn a sobering lesson, how *perseverance* (a positive trait of training bringing Roy to this moment) can shift into *perseveration*. Stuck in a sequence of sameness, Roy's best was transformed into his worst.

May God give us the wisdom to recognize when our positive trait of perseverance morphs into absurdity, when not knowing when to quit becomes a display, not of courage, but of selfishness, insisting on continuing what should have been left behind.

The story is told of Albert Einstein that he and an assistant were searching for a paper clip. He finally located one, but it was too bent to be used. Searching for something to fix the clip, they came across a large box of paper clips. Einstein is said to have opened the box, took out a new paper clip, and began to make a tool out of the clip so that he could fix the original, bent clip. His assistant was puzzled and challenged Einstein's illogical course of action. “*Why bother with*

the bent clip, for goodness sake? You have a whole box of good ones.” Einstein is said to have replied, “*Once I’m set on a goal, it becomes difficult to deflect me.*” Einstein stayed with the “before” of what might logically have come next. *Preposterous!*

Churches can get stuck, too. Our Mission Statement at reflects our desire never to be stuck in the before of what comes next. “*Bring in. Build up. Reach out.*” Each stage is what should come next. It would be preposterous to seek only membership growth then offer nothing for the individual’s spiritual growth. Yes, we want to *Bring in*, but it doesn’t stop there. We want, through member involvement, to *Build up*.

Our Lay Leadership Development Committee meets this week and you may be asked to serve in a role of servant leadership. If so, I hope you’ll pray about your involvement and contribute your gifts to the building up of the body of Christ.

Next step? We *Reach out*. How *preposterous* it would be to see a church turn in only toward itself. In my first months at Christ of the Hills I’ve been so grateful to see the many ways our church reaches out beyond these walls and gates in service, mission, and love.

I’m proud to be a part of a church with a forward vision, balancing *pre-* with *post-* by honoring the roots of our tradition while at the same time being lifted by upon the wings of our promise for tomorrow.