

KICKING THE SACRED COW

At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath, and His disciples became hungry and began to pick the heads of grain and eat. But when the Pharisees saw this, they said to Him, "Look, Your disciples do what is not lawful to do on a Sabbath." But He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he became hungry, he and his companions, how he entered the house of God, and they ate the consecrated bread, which was not lawful for him to eat nor for those with him, but for the priests alone? "Or have you not read in the Law, that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath and are innocent? "But I say to you that something greater than the temple is here. "But if you had known what this means, 'I DESIRE COMPASSION, AND NOT A SACRIFICE,' you would not have condemned the innocent.

(Matthew 21:1-8)

Sacred cows are not unique to poverty stricken eastern societies. I know this to be a fact because I kicked one located on the great plains of America. I do not know what kind of penalty is inflicted for booting a holy heifer in India, but, in American, the punishment is pretty harsh.

It seemed harmless enough. The date etched in stone above the front door identified it as more than sixty years old. It was a solid structure which had been well maintained over the decades. There was nothing unique about the architecture nor the landscape. It blended into the surroundings like a Holstein on the streets of New Delhi.

After investing more than a dozen years in the community, ignorance was not an excuse in my defense. When I moved to this agricultural village, it was plainly stated that the school was the hub of the community life. To schedule a church event which coincided with a school activity was to invite failure. It seemed reasonable since the school appeared to be amenable to what we wanted to do at the church. The Lord appeared to be well represented in the Superintendent's office and on the School Board.

For twelve years I sought to be a fully functioning member of the community by participating in the school endeavors. Even before my eldest son started kindergarten I frequented the hallways and was habitually seen at PTA meetings. I must confess that I was not a blind supporter of everything labeled as educational necessities. However, I was willing to keep most of my reservations to myself and still support the school.

I sought to use my skills and resources to make the school a success. During the first few years I served as the community Holy Man by offering prayers at meetings when necessary. Although I am not a great fan of performance prayer, I tried to offer words of encouragement without sounding too cliché.

One year I was asked to play the piano for the eighth grade graduation ceremony. I have never been overly confident in my musical skills, but it did afford the opportunity to avoid pronouncing the invocation. It was not the last time I was to use my musical talent for the school.

It happened the year the most revered music teacher left for greener pastures. Her replacement was judged to be inadequate before she arrived. Consequently, no one was willing to be the pianist for the district music contest. Somebody must have told her that the preacher can play, so she called. Feeling sorry for her plight, I agreed.

This task required meeting with the choir every afternoon for several weeks. It was a difficult situation because she had no control over our precious children. Not wanting to usurp her position, I held my tongue as she vainly tried to turn the turmoil into tunes. The music festival came and went with little excitement. Other than being surprised with a sight reading event, I predominately hit the correct keys.

I survived but the music teacher's contract was not renewed. Her lack of control in the classroom caused the School Board to overreact. The successor to the baton was torn

between teaching at our little school or joining the Marines. Our school and our nation's defense would have been better served if she had chosen the later. She ultimately led to my swift kick of the sacred cow. However, she was not the only catalyst.

Scripture is to be interpreted from an objective perspective. If you have ever pastored a church, you know such exegesis is impossible. We tend to read the Holy Writings through the eyes of our experience, colored by the members of our congregation.

Having made this observation, let me say that I have arrived at the definitive interpretation of Paul's reference to his "thorn in the flesh." Any good commentator will list a dozen or more options for identifying Paul's painful condition. After trying to be the pastor of the first grade teacher for a decade, I know the Apostle's problem.

A literal translation of the phrase from the original language reads, "pain in the rear," and Paul was speaking about a woman in one of his churches. Perhaps it was Euodia or Syntyche from the church at Philippi. In my case it was this first grade teacher.

This is not the place for me to describe the suffering she inflicted upon me or the church -- we were talking about the school. She proudly held the reputation of being extremely demanding of her students. This might be a good quality for a professor at Harvard Law School. However, for six-year-olds in first grade, it was a little too much.

On more than one occasion I had to convince parents not to withdraw their children from school after a few weeks of first grade. I had several honest conferences with the School Superintendent about her problems. These conferences were never very easy because he was a deacon in our church and married to this first grade teacher. He admitted the problem but also confessed his impotence to make a change. I constantly had to resist the urge to preach on submissive wives.

All three of my sons completed first grade and maintained their sanity. Although this teacher was not an immediate factor which caused me to kick the cow, the years of constantly dealing with this situation contributed to my action. It was an intolerable situation which the School Board refused to alleviate.

There were other problems in our school. We had a Social Studies teacher who failed a summer refresher course at a Junior College; a coach who was idolized by the kids but who was as irresponsible as a watch dog in a meat packing plant; a bus driver who made hollywood starlets seem like nuns in a convent; and a teacher's aide who used language which would be the envy of any sailor. Probably the most discouraging situation was a School Board with the wrong agenda.

Most communities elect School Board members who promise to keep taxes low. The education of our children is a secondary objective. As a result, we have Board Members who know very little about education. Many of them were not only poor students as children, but have not shown any educational aptitude as adults.

Everything reported about the American educational system indicates that our schools are failing. It is almost cliché to say that our schools are getting failing grades on their report cards. They say that the majority of our schools are inadequate and our was no exception.

It is ironic that schools encourage parents to be involved in the educational process of their children and then balk when they do. What they really want is mothers who will make cookies and punch for school parties. It was my interest in what my children were learning (and not learning) which motivated me to take action. It was also the deed which led to a swift and decisive response by the community.

In order to provide a better educational opportunity for our sons, we pulled them out of school to teach them at home. It was not a rash decision, even though it was precipitated by some concrete situations at the school. We had a confrontation with the drill sergeant music teacher and the vulgar tongued teacher's aide. They both received a token slap on the wrist but nothing concrete as accomplished to solve the predicament.

The initial reaction from folks was an expressed concern for our son's education. My wife has had the reputation of being one of the best children's teachers in our church. People have always told me that I missed my calling by not being a teacher. All of a sudden, both of us were inadequate to teach.

Hidden behind this facade of concern for our children's well-being was the fact that the sacred cow had been booted. Within my action, people heard me criticizing the school. In all fairness, let me add that the heifer was already ailing before my blow. The state mandated school finance policy was in shambles. The community was in fear of having the school closed down by big city politicians. Although my action was not fatal, it came at a very uncomfortable time.

A few days after announcing our decision, our family left town for the Christmas holidays. Later, I learned there was an attempt to muster a lynch mob to be waiting on the highway for our return. Those who had expressed the most contempt for our school system over the years were the most vocal in their assault. Sometimes people are really fickle.

I tried to weather the storm and maintain my pastoral integrity. It was like an intense chess match, every move requiring serious contemplation. I was unwilling to change my decision but I also wanted folks to know that I intended no harm. I felt like a tourist walking down the dusty streets of a Hindu village. I had stumbled and fallen into the sacred cow. Everybody watched the animal get hit and now they all stood in stunned silence to see who would administer the necessary judgment.

Eventually I was forced to offer my resignation as Pastor. It was not so much because of the overwhelming opposition. Only a few actually sought my dismissal. The real problem was the ability of the silent majority to remain silent. After all, Pastors can be replaced. Just call the seminary and have them send up another one. On the other hand, sacred cows are hard to find.

I left the town with the sacred cow grazing contentedly in the same pastures I found it more than a decade earlier. But, it was an opportunity for the Lord to reveal greener pastures for me and my family. Some cows will always be sacred, or at least until the price of beef gets high enough.