

Joining up with the Master

BY LIZ KELLY

This week's reading from Matthew (9:36-10:8) begins with one of the most familiar Christian metaphors of all time: sheep and their shepherd. "At the sight of the crowds, Jesus' heart was moved with pity for them because they were troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd." And although the animal is different, the metaphor reminds me of a demonstration I attended recently by "a real-life horse whisperer," Monty Roberts. (Until I run into a "real-life sheep whisperer," this illustration will have to do.)

Roberts rose above an egregiously abusive childhood to become one of the most celebrated horse trainers in the world. His philosophy in training, referred to as "join-up," involves communicating with the horse in his own language without the use of pain or torture. The name of his technique says it all; rather than "breaking" the animal, join-up allows the animal to choose the trainer, to seek him because he represents safety and security and because, as herd animals, horses

— and sheep — would rather not be alone. In his astounding demonstration, Roberts is gentle and quiet, never raising his voice or inflicting pain on the animal, instead always offering the opportunity to join-up with the trainer or go to work, running circles around him in the pen.

The last horse he worked with during the demonstration was a 3-year-old black Arabian stallion. A spectacular animal, the stallion was 5-0 — that is, he had thrown all five of the riders who had attempted to mount him. Not a bad record.

A minute after entering the ring, Roberts put the animal to work, trotting him around the outside of the round pen directing him only with his body language. He went about his work with the kind of calm certainty that comes from having experienced an event thousands of times, and it didn't take long for the horse to realize that joining up was a lot more fun, secure and productive than running cir-

cles around that ring. Minutes later he was following Roberts around as if he had done so every day of his life; and in less than 30 minutes, that magnificent animal had accepted a bridle and saddle and was carrying a rider around the ring.

It was such a beautiful idea — simple, as most great ideas are: Present the options and then let the horse decide. Do you want to join up with the master where you will find security, care, provision and purpose, or do you want to spend your days in pointless toil, unsure of your next meal, running in circles, going nowhere

alone?

Invariably, each animal during the demonstration chose to join-up.

I don't know about you, but I know I spend way more time running around in circles than I need to, when the opportunity is always available to join my will to my Master's. Without my Master, I am running circles around the ring of

the universe, lost in chaotic work that has no real value, frightened and confused. And not to liken the apostles to herd animals or vice versa (Roberts himself admonishes those who give in to the temptation to anthropomorphize horses or any other animal), but think how simple and thrilling the idea must have been to them to "join up and see what He can accomplish through you."

Too often, I think we see our relationship with God as His "breaking" us, when really, a relationship with anyone is more of a joining up process. Becoming a disciple is just that, a joining up with the Lord in order that we have security, provision, a common goal, and that our lives have meaning and purpose.

At the end of the demonstration, Roberts was encouraging the stallion: "You have a new job, fella. You're going to be taking people all kinds of places!"

And so it is with Christ: When we're willing to join up, like the apostles, we are given not only security and the assurance of provision, but eternal purpose that might just take us all kinds of exciting places. □

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