

To Catch A Rattlesnake

I've shared several stories from my days as a student minister in north-western Oklahoma. One thing I don't think I've told you about is the annual Rattlesnake Roundup. People go out into the sagebrush and sand hills and *hunt* rattlesnakes—bring 'em back alive! Some even *catch* 'em barehanded!

It's the biggest event of the year, the first weekend after Easter! That little town of about 950 people will see up to 40,000 people over that weekend! People come from all over the world. Motels are booked for miles around. And the festivities... A carnival at each end of town; a bandstand with Country Bands playing constantly; arts and crafts booths on every vacant lot; and food booths... And the most popular food sold? Rattlesnake meat (tastes like chicken!)

But some folks—mostly cowboys and “bubbas”—came to hunt rattlesnakes. Now, all this started out of necessity. Cattle ranchers were losing cattle to rattlesnakes—especially in the springtime. So, the cowboys went out every spring to *kill* rattlesnakes. Now, *there's* an idea I can live with!

Then, somebody came up with the idea of putting a bounty on the rattlesnakes: whoever brought in the most rattlesnakes got a big bonus, come payday. Of course, then, they were bringing in *dead* rattlesnakes. And they'd skin the snakes and use the hide for hatbands, and belts, and so forth.

Somewhere along the line—you know how cowboys are—it got to be more *macho* to catch the rattlesnakes alive; and the whole thing got out of hand.

People come from all over to hunt the critters. Some of them bring very sophisticated equipment: long poles with wire loops and trigger mechanisms, so you can catch 'em and never get within ten feet of them. And they have metal cages with holes for ventilation, where they put the snakes. But the “real men” still catch 'em barehanded, and put 'em in a tow sack!

Back in town, they dump 'em in a cage and “Bubba” gets in there with them!

Now, here's how “real men” catch a rattlesnake (so I'm told): first, you take a stick—four or five feet long—and pin the snake's head to the ground with the stick. Then you reach down and *take hold* of the snake, just behind its head, and pick it up. You see, if you're holding the snake just behind its head, it can't turn its head and bite you. And then you put the snake in a burlap bag, throw it over your shoulder, and go look for another snake.

But, here's the secret: once you take hold of the snake, *don't let go* until you're ready to drop it into the bag.

Which brings us to our text for today:

(PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11 NRSV)

⁵ *Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,*

⁶ *who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,*

⁷ *but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.*

And being found in human form,

⁸ *he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of*

death—even death on a cross.

⁹ *Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name,*

¹⁰ *so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,*

¹¹ *and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

This probably was an early Christian hymn; and it describes a two-sided action on the part of Christ. First, "he *emptied* himself". On the other side, he "took on the very nature of a servant." The dual action: "Letting Go and Taking Hold".

He emptied himself—he "let go"—of the form of God; and he "took hold" of the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of man.

The Messiah was expected to ride into Jerusalem on a white horse, with full armor, sword and shield, leading a victorious army: bugles blaring, banners flying. He'd overthrow the Romans, be clad in purple and crowned "King of the World." Christ "let go" of that image—and "took hold" of a manger. He *did* ride into Jerusalem; but on a donkey, surrounded by children, not a victorious army. And he clad himself with a towel, and washed his disciples' feet. And his crown was made of thorns.

They would have crowned him king. He let go of that. He let go of status, and took hold of mutuality—he ate with sinners and publicans. He let go of God-ness; and took hold of servanthood. And it's important to understand how he did that.

In our text one particular word is critical: that word is "form". Christ "...emptied himself and took on the form of a servant." If you're reading *The Living Bible*, here's what you will find: "...he took on the disguise of a servant."

The word in the original language of the New Testament is $\mu\omicron\rho\phi\eta$ (pronounced, more - feh). It's the root of the English word, "metamorphosis"—a process in which a caterpillar crawls out on a limb and spins a cocoon. And in that cocoon he doesn't put on a butterfly disguise; he *becomes* a butterfly. The essence changes!

In that same way Christ "let go" of the form—the $\mu\omicron\rho\phi\eta$ —of God, and "took hold" of the form—the $\mu\omicron\rho\phi\eta$ —of a servant. In the creation we were made "like God"—in the image of God; in the Incarnation, God became "like us". And it's important for us to understand why he did that.

My favorite cartoon series is "The Roadrunner". I love the way he always evades all the coyote's tricks. But the one I really identify with is the coyote. I

know how it feels to have all your best plans blow up in your face. I can identify.

Perhaps most important of all, when Christ let go of equality with God, he took hold of empathy.

It's important for us to "identify" with each other. Alcoholics, children and spouses of alcoholics, divorcees, children of broken homes, rape victims, parents who've lost children.... All these people and many others know their healing is built on "identification:" saying to each other, "I know how you feel; I've been through it! And because I'm recovering, you can, too."

In Christ, God empathized with humanity. God said, "I know how you feel; I've been through it!" Christ experienced fully our joys and sorrows; our frustrations and temptations, our success and the failures. And, most important of all, he knows what it's like to face one's own death, and what is it to be human if not to face death?

Now, remember the rattlesnake hunt? Remember that I said, once you "take hold" of the rattlesnake, the important thing is to hold on! The text says, "...being found in human form, he took hold of obedience, even unto death."

Once took hold of human form, Christ held on all the way to the end. He didn't bail out; he rode all the way to the end of the line; all the way to death. He identified completely with us; he died. And Paul says, "Have this mind among you."

This may explain why some people have trouble accepting the total humanity of Jesus. Most people have no problem with the divinity of Christ; that's comfortable. We can use his divinity as an excuse: he was, after all, divine; I'm "only human."

But *if he's human*—if his feet touch the ground—there'll be footprints. And, if we follow those footprints—if *we're* obedient—those footprints may lead to places we don't want to go.

For over twenty years I have attempted to pattern my ministry from Micah 6:8, "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love mercy and to walk humbly with thy God." Former General Minister and President of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Dick Hamm, paraphrased that verse this way: "Deep spirituality, True Community and a Passion for Justice."

The key to it all is obedience. Obedience at this level is not a ritual. It's an identification with Christ. Paul calls it, "having the mind of Christ."

Jesus said, "If anyone would follow me, let him deny himself"—deny, empty, "let go". Same word! "Let him 'Let Go' his own agenda and 'take hold' of Christ's agenda." A "letting go" and a "taking hold." And, note: that was not said from a golden throne in a marble palace by a king dressed in purple. It was said on the way to a cross. He knows how it feels to be human. And Paul says, "Have the same mind among you."

It was into humanness that he was called. It was to humanness he was obedient. And it was through his obedience that our humanness is received and justified.

In other words, he became "like us", in order to show us how to become "like him." And isn't becoming "like him" is the ultimate goal of all Christians?