

Prayer: There are probably more spiritual lessons we could derive from the stiff neck, but the most important one is never to have one! The easiest way to avoid a spiritual stiff neck is to remember ourselves in comparison to the great God whom we serve: "But now, O LORD, You are our Father; we are the clay, and You our potter; and all we are the work of Your hand. Do not be furious, O LORD, nor remember iniquity forever; indeed, please look—we all are Your people!" Amen. (Isaiah 64:8-9).

Ever dealt with someone stubborn? I mean really stubborn, as in talking-to-a-wall stubborn. I've even heard some folks describing themselves this way as if it were a compliment. It's not.

Stiff-necked is one of those descriptions that we don't use nearly enough. In Exodus 32, things blow up among God's people; and Aaron is complicit in the dissent, while Moses is hanging out on the mountain with God.

And the LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people" (Exodus 32:9).

The "stiff-necked" image reflects that of a beast of burden refusing to lower its head to receive the yoke. It will not submit to its master's will, intending instead to do what it wants.

We see how the image applies to us human beings as well. It connotes someone who is inflexible, unyielding, unwilling to budge or submit. It's someone who won't admit they're wrong; who won't say they're sorry; who refuses to follow someone else's guidance. You don't need to live long to meet someone who epitomizes this trait. It's quite unpleasant and usually makes a significant impression.

But, of course, like most things, the place we need to start to massage that stiff-neck isn't at work or church, or even at home in our spouses or kids. Yes, it begins with our own neck as there's a bit of stiff-necked-ness in us all, isn't there?

Do you struggle to tell someone you were wrong? Have you admitted to your children that it was sinful when you lost your temper the other day? When deciding between God's way and your way, do you ever lift your head determinedly and refuse to put on God's yoke?

Unfortunately, stiff necks didn't only exist in Bible times. Stubbornness streaks are in us all.

Yes, the Israelites were familiar with the term stiff-necked, so when the Lord used it to describe them, they got the message. When God's chosen people refused to love God, honor God, and obey God, they were not living the purpose for which God chose them as God's own (see Isaiah 41:8–9; Jeremiah 7:23–24; Exodus 19:5–6).

God made God's will clear to the Israelites, and their disobedience was rightly referred to as being stiff-necked and hard-hearted. As Israel rebelled against God, they ignored the "crops" that God used to try to redirect them.

God sees what happening as Moses is on the mountain and gets so angry that God asks for space from Moses so that the stiff-necked ones can be blown away and God will start over with Moses. Wow, stand back, Moses; this is going to be epic.

But then Moses doesn't stand back. He gets in God's face and says, "You've done all this to get them this far, and now you're going to pull the plug? And everyone around is going to say, 'What a nasty God, to go through all of this only to destroy them in the desert.' It isn't going to do your reputation any good."

This is the same God that, in the next chapter, Moses says, "Show me your glory." What better view of God's glory than to watch a whole nation be blown away? Except that isn't the kind of glory that Moses wants to follow. It isn't the kind of power that Moses wants to see.

"Remember," Moses tells God, "Remember the faithful ones, Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants." Interesting that Moses uses the new name of the patriarch, Jacob. Elsewhere in the scriptures, the phrase is Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But here, Moses calls him Israel, representing the whole people. And the translation of the name is "He who strives with God."

In other words, you picked these people, and you value the wrestling match. You wanted to be in a relationship with them, not simply have automatic obedience. This mess, and indeed it is a mess (Moses gets heated off too when he gets back down among them), is God's fault, Moses seems to be saying. So, don't blow up now. Get back in there and wrestle.

And the scripture says, "God changed God's mind." What an amazing verse. Maybe God was really just testing Moses and wanted to see what Moses would do if God "pretended" to be angry enough to destroy the people. But the text says, "God changed his mind." It doesn't say God patted Moses on the head and said, "Good job, you figured out what I intended all along." No, no. It says, "God changed his mind about the disaster that God planned to bring on God's people." On His people.

There is a claiming at last. Notice how the argument plays out. In verse 7, God is upset and angry about what is seen happening among the people with Aaron and the calf and the reveling. God says, "Go down at once. Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt..." Your people, Moses, whom you brought out. Notice, God is already washing the Divine Hands of the people. But Moses claps back in verse 11: "O Lord, why does Your wrath burn hot against Your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand." He takes God's own words and turns them around. Your people, Moses, God says. Your people, God, Moses says.

But wait a minute. It isn't simply a repetition. Moses adds to the declaration. "Your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand." With great power, says Moses. I couldn't do this; I couldn't have been responsible for this exodus event. It took someone of power. But not just power. "And a mighty hand." A personal investment. A connection was claimed here. "Remember how all this started?", says Moses. "You said you were coming to set your people free. And you did it. I was an instrument; I was a tool in the working of the project. But you were the power. It was your hand, not mine, that set the people free. These are your people, Lord, don't forget that. Remember the promises you made. Remember the connection you have, the investment in these people. Don't wipe them out only to start over."

And God changed God's mind. Then threw a party. Well, maybe not quite a party for those dancing around the golden calf. There was still work to be done and corrections to come. But there was a party coming. And Jesus wanted to tell us about that party. Our gospel text for this week recounts the essence of the party, at least in a parable form. Which, of course, raises all kinds of questions for us. That's the purpose of a parable, to raise questions. The word itself, parable, means to throw alongside. A parable is a story or a metaphor and image thrown alongside something else to show correlations or, sometimes, differences. The question sometimes is, "What is the parable thrown alongside?"

Matthew doesn't give us a lot of contexts this time. He just says, "once more Jesus spoke to them in parables." Well, yes, thank you. "It is the kingdom of heaven," Jesus says. "It's like a party." But it's a specific kind of party, a wedding banquet. That means there is commitment involved. It means that something is being asked of those who attend. A wedding might simply be a spectator sport in our culture, but not so for Jesus. He sees something deeper and more profound, something that asks for something from us. That's why those who make light of the invitation are dealt with harshly. And it is also why that guy who showed up in the wrong clothes, well that wasn't just a fashion faux pas, it was something deeper. It was a thumbing of the nose at those being honored. And he too comes to a messy end.

Our question, of course, is how correlative is this story? In other words, is there an army ready to come to destroy any who make light of the kingdom of heaven? Or if we do show up but don't show the proper respect for the covenants involved, will the bouncers come and toss us out on our ears? Admit it, sometimes you hope so. At least you hope that those people over there get what is coming to them. We hope that those who sneer at us good people will suffer for their snub. What we don't hope is that the attitude check doesn't look too closely at us. After all, we aren't stiff-necked, are we?

Talk to the Lord about it. Ask him to help you see your struggles with submission. Ask God to shine God's light on that area of your life that you're still stubbornly keeping from God. And then ask God to work on your stiff neck. If we keep this distinction clear in our minds, our heads will be always bowed and our necks never stiff. Amen.