

The Quill Pig Chronicles

Quill pig is another name for a porcupine. Porcupines are unattractive and unpopular, but, as animals go, and unlike eagles, elephants, and donkeys, they are reasonably harmless good neighbors that mind their own business. Here's where we can talk about being good neighbors and why it's eternally important.

Wednesday, February 20, 2013

Billy

I knew that Andy, a guy in my Boy Scout troop whose basic decency was lost on the "cool" crowd and us wannabes, had one younger brother. But it was the brother I didn't know he had who, like the eighth son of Jesse of Bethlehem, has been the member of that family I most remember now. He's the first person I think of when I need to be reminded that God rewards those who "do not follow the crowd in doing wrong" (Ex 23:2).

Mercer Island, a suburb of Seattle, used to host a day of bicycle races every summer for every category from kids on trikes to adults on expensive imported racing machines. Perhaps the years have collapsed together as my memory ages, but it seems to me that the adult race was won that year by Bruce Gustafson, whose name is enshrined on the wall of the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial.

Billy was perhaps a rising third grader that day. If he wasn't the smallest kid who lined up for the race in his age category, the story is better if he was. At any rate, I heard the guy with the starter's pistol point up Island Crest Way tell them at least twice, "The race is to the first traffic cone and back," before firing the gun. I don't know who rode the fastest that day, but I do know (again, subject to memory modifications) who was slowest: Billy.

You can guess the rest. The hotshots went frantically past the first traffic cone to the second. Meantime, Billy turned around at the first cone and came back, finishing while the pack was making the turn at the second cone. He braked just after crossing the line and looked at the judges as if to say, "Well, here I am. I did what you told me. Now what?"

Now what, indeed. I'm glad I wasn't one of the judges who had to decide what to do then, especially since Billy's father was the mayor. What would you do? Would you give Billy the blue ribbon and tell the other kids, "It's a hard lesson for you, but you should have followed instructions"? Would you rerun the race, or redefine the course as what the faster racers raced and give Billy a special prize?

I don't remember what they did. But I'll never forget the expression on Billy's face when he braked at the finish line: "Here I am. I did what you told me. Now what?"

Billy got it right that day, and I expect he's made a lifestyle of getting it right, whatever his "it" is. But I'm no Billy, though we share the distinction of going against the crowd. And just as the other boys in that race could ride circles around Billy, the Christians I'm trying to take on in this blog run circles around me when it comes to spiritual disciplines. If I need to see a lost cause apart from God's grace in Christ, I can always look in the mirror.

But one place I'm willing to take the risk of going it alone is in the area of neighborliness: if God calls us to love our neighbors as ourselves and to do for others what we would have them do for us, then politics—some people extorting others' wealth and using it for purposes the producers consider repugnant—is wrong, and Christians have no business being part of the process, if for no other reason than that it makes us unwelcome when we go to share the good news of Christ with our political opponents.

So if you want to talk about my sins, that's fine. I've got plenty to keep the discussion going long into the night. But eventually we need to talk about why the church that was so influential and did so much good in the early days of the European settlement of this continent has become irrelevant at best today. I would suggest that the answer is her replacement of biblical neighborliness with Progressive politics.

Bruce Gustafson was a hero to me during my short bicycle racing career. I wish he had pulled a Billy when his contemporaries, to no one's benefit, followed Uncle Sam to their deaths in Vietnam. I doubly wish today's evangelicals were not so eager to have their children follow the pack to the second traffic cone in Afghanistan and the war on liberty that is the War on Drugs.

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Bill Anshell April 6, 2016 at 3:02 PM

Hi, Henry: Wow, I remember the race well, and exactly as you described it. The powers-that-be treated me okay; although they didn't crown me as the winner of the race, somehow I mysteriously won the raffle that day for a new bike (which I'm sure I needed, my parents not being inclined to spend much). Maybe I won the raffle fair and square, maybe not, but that day isn't a bad memory for me. And, yes, I stayed a non-conformist – I'm a jazz musician now. Thanks for writing that story; sorry it took me so long to see it, but Facebook had dumped your post in its "filtered messages" folder.

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