

The Ride of Your Life

Good evening. I'd like to thank our graduates for giving me this opportunity. It's not often that I get to speak publicly when not either preaching or teaching – and tonight I will do neither. Instead I want to share some thoughts of a more personal nature with the graduates and the rest of you. If you want to hear a sermon, come to St. Paul on Sunday.

In the big scheme of things, 8th grade graduation is one of the smaller milestones you'll pass on your journey through life. Far more significant is Confirmation, which you've all recently achieved. Other momentous milestones are fast approaching. Soon you'll have driver's licenses (scary thought!), and within the next decade or so you will graduate from high school, and college or trade school, move out on your own, start a career, possibly get married, and maybe even experience the birth of your first child (hopefully in that order). And when you get to that point and look back on tonight, you well might wonder what all the fuss was about.

And yet, in a very significant way, this evening we do mark a major transition in your lives. From here you go forth into a world that is far more diverse, and in many ways more hazardous than the relatively sheltered existence you've known here at CLS. The very fact that you are here attests to the differences in these two worlds, because the primary reason this school exists is to give you something you can't get out there: a Christ-centered education. You are here tonight because people, a lot of whom are in this room, love you dearly and care enough about you to make major sacrifices so that you can start your adult life on the right footing – on the solid foundation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ – so that no matter where you go or what happens to you in the future, you will always have that. There is no greater gift they could give you, and you owe them a huge debt of gratitude.

But knowing that you are firmly grounded on God's Word and that you plan to continue to feed your life of faith (at least, that's what you've sworn to do), I feel fairly comfortable going off my professional script and offering some practical advice. I'd like to share a story that some of you have heard and that I'm often asked to retell; but I've peppered it with a few lessons I've picked up along the way that I hope you can make use of.

In the late 1980s, I was an Army Engineer officer stationed at Ft. Ord, California. Because I'd had some high school Spanish, I was chosen to be part of a team of about 20 officers and NCOs who were to go to Paraguay in South America for two weeks in order to participate as advisors for a military "war game" they were conducting at their senior officer training school. Our military does this sort of support mission with friendly nations partially to help train foreign armies, and also to ensure that should we ever be allies in a conflict, we will understand each other's operations well enough to work together. It's especially important because most of the world's armies train to fight their last war over again. Whatever happened then shapes how their planners and strategists think about how the next war will be. And since Paraguay's last war was about the same time as our own Civil War, you can imagine how out of date their tactics were – especially considering they lost that war pretty badly.

Oh, they had updated some since then. Seeing their military equipment, vehicles, and planes was like visiting a WWII museum. But despite the differences in technology, language, and culture, we found them to be professionals in every sense of the word, and we really enjoyed working with them.

And it wasn't all work either. They treated us very well and showed off just about everything in their country they were proud of. In the course of the two weeks we got to see and

experience of lot of really interesting things – which leads me to the day we took a tour of the Paraguayan Army Cavalry School. Now, we have cavalry in our army, but they get around in tanks, armored vehicles, and helicopters. In Paraguay they still have the old fashioned horse mounted kind, armed with carbines, sabers, and lances.

As part of our visit there, they took us on a horseback ride through the countryside on the outskirts of Asuncion, which is the capital city. Now, I need to tell you that I had never been riding before. Everything I knew about it I got from watching westerns on TV – and, of course, they make it look pretty easy. Usually it seems the horse can read the rider's mind, and man and beast move in one graceful, harmonious motion. How hard could it be? From what I'd seen, I figured it was like driving a car: point it the way you want it to go, tell it how fast, pull back to stop. Pffffffffft! That's wrong. I had no idea that a trained horse had a mind of its own and that from the moment you get on, it's a battle of wills to see who will maintain supremacy.

I didn't help that the horse they gave me was a big, ornery, old feller who'd been around for a long time and was getting ready for pasture. He let me know right away that taking a clueless Gringo for a ride around the neighborhood didn't fit into his retirement plans. They told me his name was Pedro, which is Spanish for Peter; and like his namesake he seemed to make a career of denying his lord. He sized me up right away, correctly assuming I didn't know what I was doing – and he took every advantage of it. Which brings me to the first lesson learned: Don't believe what you see on television or in the movies. It's a make-believe world that has little to do with reality.

And I'm talking about a lot more than horseback riding. Hollywood and the television industry have an incredible amount of power to shape public opinion and the way our culture thinks. Unfortunately, in the name of creative license – and let's face it: to make money – they've misused that power to undermine values and desensitize us to violence and things that should cause outrage. They've given us a false image of their "ideal world" of casual sex with no consequences, interchangeable spouses, gross materialism, unrestrained Narcissism, and no sense of modesty. It's a world in which the only worthy goal is getting whatever it is that makes you happy and feel good. That world is a lie. And if you try to live in it, it will take advantage of you and leave you hurting.

Well, anyway, we rode around in a corral for a while to get the hang of it, and I was having one heck of a time. It happened that Pedro and I were always exactly 180 degrees out of phase. When he was going down, I was going up. That part was okay; but it meant that when he was going up, I was coming down, so that we kept colliding in the middle pretty hard: smack, smack, smack! I tried everything I could think of to move with him or absorb the shock with my legs, but nothing was working. Instead, I was smashing my tailbone – and worse, it felt like the vertebrae in my lower back were being pulverized into bone meal. I didn't think I could take ten minutes of it. On top of it, we had those silly Spanish style saddles that are real flat and have nothing to hang on to. So not only was I bouncing up and down and hurting myself, I'm not coming down in the same spot: over on this side for a while, then over on the other ... practically fell off several times just walking around the corral.

But with some experimentation, I found that if we went just a bit faster, we came into phase and moved up and down together. Then I could stay on quite comfortably. So here I'd like to submit lesson two: Go your own natural pace. This applies to a lot of things in life, but perhaps for young people like yourselves, the greatest threat is trying to go too fast. There's a myth out there that says if you haven't experienced all life has to offer by a certain age (usually around 17), you've missed out. That's nonsense. There is a God-ordained rhythm and

schedule to life. Get in phase with it and you will find the ride to be much more comfortable and enriching.

We left the grounds of the military quartel and went riding out along a dirt road in what was a typical working class neighborhood. It wasn't like the wretched favelas or slums where the poorest folks lived. I'll spare you a description of those. These were individual one or two room houses made mostly of sticks and mud, with roofs either of palm fronds or corrugated tin. A few of the houses were made of bricks or boards. Each house had a small front yard where two or three mostly naked children were playing in the dirt, with a few chickens and sometimes a piglet running around free. You could see gardens behind the small houses where they grew manioc root, beans, and plantains, which were the staple foods. It's a completely different world than we are used to; and the truth is that it's more or less how the majority of the world's population lives.

I'll put this down as lesson three: most of us have absolutely no idea how good we have it in this country, and how richly God has blessed us. As a consequence, most of us have a distorted view of what it takes to be content. As poor as these people were by our standards, most of them were just as or more satisfied with their lives than are most Americans. If you ever get a chance to get out of this country and see some of the world – particularly what's called the third world, take it. It will change the way you see things.

It happened that because I was (for the sake of my tender tush) riding faster than the rest of the group, after a while I was way out in front of them. I'd stop once in a while to let them catch up, but whenever I did, soon a group of kids came out of their yards to gather around me and see what was going on. So to avoid drawing a crowd, mostly I kept moving. I figured as long as the group was in sight, I was okay. Well, at one point I looked back and saw that they'd turned off on another road maybe three quarters of a mile back. No problem, I thought, I'll just gallop back over there and catch up with them.

So, I spun Pedro around and let him know that I wanted him to hustle a bit. Off we went: ra-da-da-dump da-da-dump. It was pretty cool ... but then I got to thinking, "Hey, when are you ever going to go riding again? I wonder what this guy will do if I really open'm up." So I did. And I have to say, I'm glad I did it. It was exhilarating. We're speeding along like thunder. All the little kids in the yards were cheering and waving as the crazy Gringo sped past. It made the whole adventure worthwhile. And so I propose lesson four: Don't be afraid to run a little. I'm not suggesting that you do anything stupid, illegal, or immoral. What I mean is that sometimes we don't realize our potential or pursue our dreams because we're too afraid of failure. You'll never know what you can do unless you try. So run a little sometimes. You'll be glad you did.

All right, now we were fast approaching the intersection where I had to turn to catch up to the others. So I pulled back on the reins to let Pedro know to ease up a bit. But Pedro knows he's headed in the direction of the barn, where he really wanted to be all along. There's no response. So I pull harder. Nothing. Harder still. Still nothing. Finally I'm practically pulling his face into his chest – and all of a sudden, boom! He stops. ... But I don't.

By clinging to his mane with all my might, I did manage to stay on – but only barely. I had collapsed in a heap onto the back of his neck, and then rolled down half way one side. I hung there precariously for a few moments, and then managed to work my way back to the saddle. There's applause and cheers from the campesinos who were watching, very much entertained. I waved triumphantly, and turned to head up the other road.

But it happens that there was a drainage ditch, oh, four or five feet wide that cut through right through road I had to go down. They didn't have any culverts. I didn't think twice about it; but Pedro looks at it, pauses for half a second, and then sort of leaps over it. Again, I'm thinking, "No problem here." I just stood in the stirrups—and the next thing I know I'm lying on my back in the foul black water of the ditch wondering what happened.

Turns out the reason I'd come down so hard on Pedro's neck was that my left stirrup strap had broken, and I didn't know it. It was an old, unused saddle and the leather was dry and brittle. So when I stood in the stirrups and put half my weight on my left foot, there was nothing there. He went up and over, and I went over and back. Several points to make here:

Lesson five: be careful about to whom you open up. After I fell, someone told me that you need to keep the horse's head up. If his head is up, he can't see where his feet are landing, so he steps normally. If I'd done that, Pedro would have just walked through the ditch without jumping, and I would have stayed clean and dry. But by sharing too much with the horse, I was left bruised, filthy, and humiliated. The same can happen if we too freely open our hearts and deepest thoughts and desires to people whom, quite frankly, don't need to know. This is especially important now with all those social media sites people get wrapped up in, Facebook and what not, on which they put all kinds of personal and private information out there for the world to see. And don't get me wrong: there are relationships in which you must be completely open and trusting, and I want you to have those. What I'm saying is build and nurture those relationships carefully, and don't expose yourself needlessly to those who might hurt you.

Lesson six is this: Don't take yourself too seriously. Even as I was lying in the mud, coming the realization that the reason the ditch smelled so bad was because it was the sewage system, I had to admit that the whole thing was pretty funny. If everyone is laughing at you, though there are exceptions, chances are that there is good reason to laugh at yourself. Lighten up.

And lesson seven (you can guess this one): If you fall off ... that's right, get back on. Too often we sit idly feeling sorry for ourselves when we take a tumble. It accomplishes nothing except making you feel worse. So brush yourself off and get back on whatever it is you fall from ... which is what I did, even though the riding was a bit more difficult. You see, I reattached the stirrup strap the best I could, but to do that, it ended up being a lot shorter than the other. So now I'm riding with one knee way up here; which looked as silly as it felt awkward. You might want to refer to lesson six again: Don't take yourself too seriously.

It turned out we were riding around in a big loop. We had passed the halfway point and were heading back to the quartel again. Things had been going fairly smoothly (for a couple of minutes anyway), when all of a sudden a large, mangy, yellow dog came shooting out from a yard, barking, snarling, and just being nasty. Now there's twenty-five of us in the group, the team of us Americans and half a dozen Paraguayans. But out of this whole group, which horse do you suppose this dog makes the special target of his attack? You guessed it.

So here's the dog barking and snapping at Pedro's legs. The horse takes a couple of side kicks at the dog, which only makes the dog madder. I'm trying to keep the horse calm and under control; but pretty soon he's had enough of it, and off he goes in a dead sprint again. It was fun the first time, but now, riding with one foot way up here, I'm just trying to hang on for dear life. And then, wouldn't you know it, that's when the right stirrup strap breaks.

Lesson eight: Life is not fair. Get over it. Too many people mope about feeling bad about some supposed injustice they've suffered. They feel God has singled them out for abuse. It's not true. Life is not fair, and no one ever said it would be. What is true is this: God does not always give us what we want; but he always gives us what he knows we need. And sometimes we need a little trouble to remind us that what we need most is him.

Because most of my weight had been on my right leg, when the strap broke I fell to that side; but because I was leaning forward, I fell on Pedro's neck again. The result is that now I'm hanging on to the horse like this: arms around his neck and my body dangling off the side. I'm doing my best to avoid being kicked or stepped on as the horse keeps running. Probably went 200 yards like that, hoping that the horse would stop. Finally it occurs to me that's not his plan. I couldn't get back on, and knew that if we kept going like this, sooner or later I was going to get hurt.

Lesson nine: Know when to let go. Sometimes it's the right thing to do. If you are going to lose anyway, do it as gracefully as possible. I did; and though I acquired a few new bruises, since I'd planned the fall I was able to mitigate the damage.

Moving on ... one of the Paraguayans caught Pedro and returned him to me so I could ride (in the saddle this time) the rest of the way home. That's lesson seven again: Get back on. The right stirrup strap was reattached so now it matched the other, so both of my knees were up by my head as I rode ... that would be lesson six again.

But now I had a better handle on things. I understood much better that a horse needs to be controlled by its rider. And I helped Pedro to understand that I'd learned this lesson, and that from here on out, I would be doing the thinking for both of us. And that brings me to Lesson ten: When you are in charge, take charge. Don't make people guess what you want. Don't assume they know. When you are in a position of leadership or responsibility, take the reins firmly in hand and lead.

The rest of the ride passed without mishap. It was a long time ago now, but I still think fondly of old Pedro every time I seal an envelope (I get the last lick in). I've not been riding since; but contrary to what you may think, I do not dislike horses. Not at all. I'm especially fond of them ground into hamburger and grilled medium rare, served on a bun along with some of that very aptly named *horse-radish* sauce.

But now I've talked entirely too long, for which I beg your pardon. Hopefully some of the lessons I learned on the ride of my life will be helpful on your ride through yours. It's been a privilege to share God's truth with you in the classroom, and I wish you every success and happiness. May God our Father keep you in his grace through faith in Jesus his Son, and bless you in every way.