

YEAH BUT...

7/24/19 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA

Proper 12 (C): Hosea 1:2-10; Psalm 85; Colossians 2:6-15, (16-19); Luke 11:1-13

Last Sunday, in honor of my return from sabbatical, a couple of girls [at the 10am service] dressed up in their Harry Potter costumes. At coffee hour they filled me in on some important trivia, as well as guessed which Hogwarts House I'd be in. This week I confirmed via an "official" Hogwarts online quiz that I would be, indeed, in the Gryffindor House.

Some of you may know, people in the Gryffindor House are bold, passionate, and brave with a highly-defined sense of right and wrong. I'm guessing it's this "highly-defined sense of right and wrong" that leads to my "yeah-but syndrome". You might know people with the same habit.

You comment on the beautiful weather, and they reply, "Yeah-but, what about that tornado they had in Kansas?" Or you announce your great increase in salary and someone grumbles, "Yeah-but now you'll have to pay more taxes!"

Our readings this morning are also filled with opportunities for "yeah-but" responses. We Christians talk about a loving, compassionate God, but then we read the shocking language of Hosea, and any one of us could easily say, "Yeah-but this God doesn't sound like the God we know! But, as I believe Richard mentioned a few weeks ago, prophets, such as Hosea, don't speak in direct language. True to the prophesy-genre of that time, the message is laden with paradox and metaphor. Once we sort through all of that, we find a simple reminder to get right with God.

The same use of paradox and metaphor is present in the parable-like illustration used by Jesus in Luke. When we read, "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened," it's pretty easy to move into "yeah-but." Yeah, God is good to us, but the truth is, not everyone gets everything they ask for—or even all that they need in this physical realm.

Which is precisely why we can't lift pieces of scripture up out of their context. This section about "whoever knocks will find the door opened," is a message Jesus delivers connected to his greater teaching. In fact, this is part of a longer passage in Luke, which is a response from Jesus to those gathered.

It must have been clear in watching Jesus pray, that there was a certain intention to his prayers, so one of the disciples asks: "Lord, teach us to pray." We all know the prayer Jesus teaches them, and intellectually, we recognize key components as, "GOD's will be done," and "GOD's kingdom come."

Yet, perhaps because the Lord's prayer is so familiar, we easily lose sight of this foundational piece of information, and start pleading for what we think will best serve us in our personal lives. Jesus does say, "Ask, and it will be given you," but studied alongside the Lord's Prayer, we realize that there is a much deeper meaning.

The fact that we begin with "Hallowed be your name," is our first clue that the intention of the prayer is to shift the focus from us to God. This is reinforced with, "Your kingdom come," reminding us that our over-arching life purpose is to help bring about the kingdom of God...to make manifest the fullness of God's glory.

Next we pray, “Give us our daily bread,” which is, for me, one of the “yeah-but” sticking points. We try to make sense of God’s world using our human minds, but if we take literally the words, “daily bread” we get caught up in the reality, that not all people—even some in our own neighborhoods—have the physical, daily bread they need to survive.

We’ve come to understand that it’s not God denying people food, but that it’s things like corrupt human systems that perpetuate poverty and hunger. At the same time, we have to acknowledge that using a human framework won’t lead to a complete understanding of God.

Our reading from Colossians sheds a little light on the methods of God, as the author refers to “spiritual” circumcision replacing the legal/religious demands of “physical” circumcision. So, what Jesus is talking about is not daily bread as in food that we consume, rather the daily sustenance we need for our spiritual journey, moving the focus, yet again, from us to God.

Then, of course, we move to: “And forgive us our sins, and lead us not into temptation.” I’ll say more about that in a minute, but I can’t help but mention here that this particular line is one of the key reasons we use what we refer to as the “contemporary” version of the Lord’s prayer in our Rite II worship.

This version of the Lord’s Prayer in Luke is just one of many, plus there are various translations of those versions. Even our Roman Catholic siblings were recently asked by the Pope to shift to a better translation. The “traditional version”, which we use in Rite I services, with thees and thous, comes from the King James Bible. That version was translated early on from Hebrew to Greek to Latin and, eventually, into English, leaving lots of room for translation errors.

What’s called the “contemporary version”, on the other hand, is the work of scholars who went back to the original, translating directly from Hebrew to English. The primary argument is that “lead us not into temptation” doesn’t match our theology. We don’t believe God would purposefully lead us into temptation, so we don’t need to pray, “Please don’t tempt us.”

The phrase is more accurately translated: “save us from the time of trial.” See the subtle difference? We need God’s help during those trying times and we’d rather avoid them, so we pray God helps us steer clear of them, instead of implying it’s God who “leads” us into temptation.

Now, back to Luke. As we shift our focus to God, we ask God to remove our fears, to forgive our sins, and to fill us with God’s grace—all so that we are prepared to take the next step in sharing God’s love with the world...whatever that next step might be for each of us.

Jesus says, “If you...know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”, clarifying that while God doesn’t want to fill our lives with things, God does promise to fill us with the Holy Spirit.

Another important note in today’s study, is that there seems to be an indication that persistence is necessary in prayer, as Jesus relates a story of a man knocking (and then knocking a whole bunch more) at his neighbor’s door in the middle of the night, before his friend finally gets up and gives him what he’s asking for. Yeah, persistence in prayer is necessary, but persistence isn’t about getting God’s attention.

Persistence in prayer is about getting us ready to pray the prayer that actually needs to be prayed. You’ve probably experienced this: you start out praying that the boss you hate dies so that you get a new boss; later you revise your prayer that she somehow realizes how awful she is and changes;

and finally, after more persistence in your prayer life, you pray that you will find a way to contribute to her healing, so that she, too, knows the peace and power of God's love.

That shift in focus back to God is part of the self-emptying, or dying of self, Jesus modeled. Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest and author, in a book about Saints Francis and Clare wrote: "Jesus himself, [the apostle] Paul, his iconoclastic interpreter, and both Francis and Clare made room for the new by a full willingness to let go of the old."

The author of Colossians says it this way: "God made you alive together with God." So, there's this sense of becoming one with God, which means our prayers help us to learn how to live in concert with God and God's workings. And the Psalmist sums it up this way: "When I called you, God, you answered me; you increased my strength within me."

Richard Rohr's explanation continues: "Only when we are eager to love can we see love and goodness in the world around us. We must ourselves remain in peace, and then we will see and find peace everywhere."

So, it turns out that the "yeah-buts" can be a helpful reminder to go deeper, which takes a lot of courage...a characteristic I understand is common to all of the Hogwarts Houses. Yeah, God seems to leave many of our prayers unanswered, but in reality they are probably being answered in ways we don't expect or notice.

Meanwhile, there are other prayers—prayers where we're not asking for things or for others to be changed—that are always answered. God will always grant us forgiveness, unconditional love, a discerning heart, peace of mind, and so on. May you all, in your own yeah-but way, persist until you get those prayers.

-AMEN

Collect of the Day

O God, the protector of all who trust in you, without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy: Increase and multiply upon us your mercy; that, with you as our ruler and guide, we may so pass through things temporal, that we lose not the things eternal; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Hosea 1:2-10

When the LORD first spoke through Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea, "Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD." So he went and took Gomer daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son.

And the Lord said to him, "Name him Jezreel; for in a little while I will punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel. On that day I will break the bow of Israel in the valley of Jezreel."

She conceived again and bore a daughter. Then the Lord said to him, "Name her Lo-ruhamah, for I will no longer have pity on the house of Israel or forgive them. But I will have pity on the house of Judah, and I will save them by the Lord their God; I will not save them by bow, or by sword, or by war, or by horses, or by horsemen."

When she had weaned Lo-ruhamah, she conceived and bore a son. Then the Lord said, "Name him Lo-ammi, for you are not my people and I am not your God."

Yet the number of the people of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which can be neither measured nor numbered; and in the place where it was said to them, "You are not my people," it shall be said to them, "Children of the living God."

Psalm 85

- 1 You have been gracious to your land, O LORD, *
you have restored the good fortune of Jacob.
- 2 You have forgiven the iniquity of your people *
and blotted out all their sins.
- 3 You have withdrawn all your fury *
and turned yourself from your wrathful indignation.
- 4 Restore us then, O God our Savior; *
let your anger depart from us.
- 5 Will you be displeased with us for ever? *
will you prolong your anger from age to age?
- 6 Will you not give us life again, *
that your people may rejoice in you?
- 7 Show us your mercy, O LORD, *
and grant us your salvation.
- 8 I will listen to what the LORD God is saying, *
for he is speaking peace to his faithful people
and to those who turn their hearts to him.
- 9 Truly, his salvation is very near to those who fear him, *
that his glory may dwell in our land.
- 10 Mercy and truth have met together; *
righteousness and peace have kissed each other.
- 11 Truth shall spring up from the earth, *
and righteousness shall look down from heaven.
- 12 The LORD will indeed grant prosperity, *
and our land will yield its increase.
- 13 Righteousness shall go before him, *
and peace shall be a pathway for his feet.

Colossians 2:6-15, (16-19)

As you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.

[Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God.]

Luke 11:1-13

Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial."

And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

"So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"