

“Ready”

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Lamentations 3:21-24

This is what I shall tell my heart, and so recover hope:
The favors of Yahweh never come to an end.
God’s kindnesses are not exhausted.
They are renewed every morning.

Romans 9:15-18a

God says to Moses, “I have mercy on whomever I choose to have mercy, and I’ll show compassion to whomever I choose to show compassion.” So then, it doesn’t depend on a human will or exertion. It depends entirely on God, who shows mercy. Scripture says to Pharaoh, “I have put you in this position for this very thing: so I can show my power in you and so that my name can be spread through all the earth. So then, God has mercy on whomever God chooses.

Luke 17:11-14

On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten men with skin diseases approached him. Keeping their distance from him, they raised their voices and said, “Jesus, Master, show us mercy!” When Jesus saw them, he said, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.” As they left, they were cleansed.

There is an old saying, “No one catches the wild ass by running after it. Yet only those who run after the wild ass will ever catch it.”

Today we are in our final week of looking closely at spirituality using Richard Rohr’s book, *Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps*.ⁱ We will continue with Part 2 of this theme after the New Year. In recent weeks, we have looked at our need for God, who alone can make our messy lives manageable. We’ve been reminded that we need to open ourselves – not just in our hearts, but with our minds and bodies as well – to make room for God’s presence in our lives. We learned a new definition for surrender. Rather than giving up or giving ourselves away, we are to give ourselves over to our relationship – with God and with others.

Next, we were reminded that we only grow deeper spiritually through “intentional struggles with contradictions, conflicts, inconsistencies, inner confusions,” and what the Bible calls sin (31). Our aim in living godly lives is not to avoid all sin – an impossibility – but to allow the struggle, the encounter itself and the wisdom we glean from the experience to change us. This is the purpose of shadow boxing, facing those aspects of ourselves that we usually keep hidden, so that we can take off the masks we all wear to be more fully ourselves as God intends us. At last, truly open to God and ourselves, we acknowledge who we really are. (You can listen to, or read, more about these past lessons by going the First Church’s website, fumcwausau.org.)

If you have done this inner work, then you are doing a truly great thing. Well done! These are difficult tasks and it is usually only those who genuinely yearn after the Holy, or who have truly hit rock bottom, who are willing to pursue them.

Today we take this spiritual quest one step further as we face our own readiness “to have God remove all of these defects of character.” Opening ourselves and allowing God to remove these false personas and to undo the ways that we hold to our own way of thinking – that universal addition – is needed if we are to grow past the middle school stage of faith. It’s in those middle school years that people begin to grow dissatisfied with living in the ways of our parents and teachers. These youth are stretching themselves. They know intuitively who they are, at least to some extent, and they begin to recognize that they need to take steps to become more fully Jake or Susana or Tua.

Just being ready for the big change doesn’t make it happen though. Rohr calls this, “The Chicken or the Egg: Which Comes First?” This is the paradox of spirituality. But rather than an either/or it’s a both/and.

Five-hundred years ago, Martin Luther and Pope Leo X argued the question from a theological perspective. The pope emphasized that we have to run after the wild ass, as it were, and “work for our salvation in fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12). Martin Luther had learned the impossibility of that in his own life and had come to embrace the truly radical position, found in Jesus’ teachings and ministry, that God’s grace is free and that no one needs to chase after it. Both were so convinced of the truth of their own position that neither would budge. If they had, there would have been no need for the original Protestant Reformation. Each of these two clerics had part of the truth if they could have only opened themselves to the other’s way of understanding God.

We do need to work at our salvation, we need to work on our own character and growing to be who God intends us to be. As my daughter Kellyn said Friday, “You can’t hear God unless you’re listen for God.” But we also need to accept that the where, when and how is always up to God.

Spirituality, that process of growing into the Holy, has a paradoxical nature. We are so used to an either/or, all or nothing way of thinking, that this is hard for us to grasp. In the last three hundred years or so, Westerners have been taught that knowledge and learning can be categorized and kept apart from other classifications. There’s the heady and artistic. The profane and the holy.

This creates all sorts of problems, one being the mistaken notion that you can embrace science or Christianity but not both. This one continues to be an outlet for people who want to deny global climate change. In truth, God is to be found in all aspect of the world around us just as God is found in art and science as well as in scripture. All things spiritual require us to be ready, with full expectation, for God reveals as God chooses, in whatever ways will get out attention.

Interestingly, Christianity regularly celebrates paradox. Think about it: we profess Jesus fully human and fully divine. We eat bread that is at once grain and yeast yet is also the spiritual food of Christ. The Church gave us these doctrine but did not give us the tools to process them. The most spiritual among us, and I include atheists and former Christians, know that an all-or-nothing understanding will not help us.

Any deep and growing faith is paradoxical. We both acknowledge that we need God and cannot mend ourselves on our own and we get out of the way, doing nothing, to ready ourselves for God to do the job.

Are you familiar with the American photographer Ansel Adams? His black-and-white photographs are works of art. Adams would wait days, even weeks, for the perfect conditions to

take his best shot. His words, “Chance favors the prepared mind,” speaks not only to art but to any person who strives to do or to be their best. We learn to prepare as fully as we can but also to wait for and fully expect what some people call “flow.”ⁱⁱ

Flow is when all the preparation and waiting come together with the inspiration, and time seems to stand still. Not surprisingly, the word *inspiration* has the same root as the word *spirit*. Think of the ways we describe God as Spirit: living water, tongues of flames, holy wind or God’s breath, a dove.

As with Ansel Adam’s photography, our waiting, our opening our hearts and preparing ourselves, our deepening longing for God, our recognition both that we don’t really want to let go along with a growing willingness to change takes time. It is the work of months and years of “fear and trembling.”

Pope Leo X was not wrong in this. But Luther was also right in accepting that, in the end, faith is something that is done *to* us and *for* us.

At both the beginning of Luke’s gospel and the end, when the angel Gabriel visited Mary, and when Jesus faced arrest and death, both declare, let it be God’s will, not mine (1:38; 23:46).

Faith was never supposed to be simply a “Me & God” personal connection. God sends Christ, not just to save me from myself and you from yourself. God sends Christ to change the world. This cannot happen with a bunch of navel-gazing Christians. A Christianity that doesn’t work for and wait for God’s transformation *in our lives* leaves the world – to use again Rohr’s words – with many Christians who are just as “materialistic, warlike, selfish, racist, sexist, and greedy for power and money” as everyone else (56). We are called to be different!

We can ask ourselves the question about the chicken or the egg forever and never get anywhere because the answer is always “both.” The question is only a puzzle when we insist upon thinking in a dualistic way.

Similarly the question, which comes first – God’s grace or our responsibility is always best answered with “both.” We have to practice opening and preparing ourselves for God’s presence and transformative action in our lives, else there will be no God in our lives. Yet without God’s action there is no grace.

I started this message with an old proverb. “No one catches the wild ass by running after it. Yet only those who run after the wild ass will ever catch it.”

Run after God, as if your life depends upon it. You will not catch God on your own. But it’s only through chasing after God, who always awaits an invitation, that you will invite God and come to know God.

ⁱ This sermon borrows heavily from Richard Rohr’s *Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps*, Franciscan Media: Cincinnati, 2011, 50-56.

ⁱⁱ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, New York: Harper, 1990 as found in Richard Rohr, *Breathing Under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps*, 54.