

I suppose I should begin with an acknowledgment that our Luke text today is a bit of a thorny one.

Generally speaking, when a biblical text refers to its hearers as *evil* it presents something of a challenge for the preacher.

But that's not really the problem I expect that most of us have with it. I don't think I'm a particularly evil person, nor do I think you are, but I am a sinner, and so are you, so in the biblical categories of sinful and sinless, we know which column we fall into, and everything else is just a matter of degrees.

What that line means is just that there is a god and we are not it. But I don't think I'm bursting any bubbles with this insight.

And so our story just means that if we, who are not perfect, and are sinners, are able to conceive of giving good gifts to those whom we love, how much more, then should we expect from God?

The problem, though, is the application of this text. "Seek, and you'll find." "Ask, and you'll receive it." God is good, we know, but we might just conclude these are empty phrases.

It's just a hop, skip and a jump from that to Huck Finn's assessment that prayer doesn't work because he put a shoebox under his bed, prayed it would be filled with gold, and on awakening and finding in empty, determined the entire endeavor is useless.

I don't imagine that any of us really believe that, but haven't you ever known someone who wanted something, indeed prayed for it, and found that they were still wanting?

I think sometimes that might just be the basis for much of what folks think about God.

You know, in Elizabeth Kubler Ross's classic book about the dying process, she identifies that we ask God for things – or ask the universe, if we're not God-believing people. That's the *bargaining* phase in the grieving process.

In fact, I expect some of us have done a bit more bargaining with God that we'd like to confess to, usually in the form of a prayer. Sometimes it goes like this: "dear God, make this headache go away and I'll *never* drink that much again."

I've heard a version of that prayer in church many times, come to think of it.

Or perhaps something like this, "God if I don't get caught this time, I'll never cheat again."

Or perhaps, "help me pay the bills this month, God, and I'll never waste money on that again."

Or my brother's bargain, "Dear God, get me to the dentist and I'll never crunch on anything that hard again."

Funny thing, I've never heard of it working. Hangovers end when they end. Cheaters either can cover their tracks or can't. Budgets work or don't work based on whether we adhere to them or not.

And my brother's dentist would have seen him anyway.

These sorts of bargains don't really tell us anything about God, *they just tell us about ourselves*.

No, if we want to understand this text rightly, this odd interlude about asking and receiving, we need to know who God rightly is.

And for that, let's turn to a couple of Old Testament stories.

The Old Testament, by the way, tells us just as much about who God is as the New Testament does. It takes a bit more effort to understand sometimes as the stories are considerably older and the cultures are a little further from what we understand. But remember this: It's the same God in the Old Testament as in the New. If you've ever heard the old heresy that the God of the Old Testament is a god of judgment and the god of the New is a God of grace, that just isn't the case. There's incredible grace all through the Old Testament, and there is plenty of judgment in the New. That little bit of heresy got started by Marcion in the second century and we've never quite shaken it. So let me tell you a couple of Old Testament stories that tell us a little about who God is.

Let's use the two most risqué books in the Bible, Hosea and Song of Songs.

Now, Hosea is really only a risqué book because the language is so crude by our standards. The story line is actually quite simple, it's an allegory for God's relationship with Israel. (By the way, it was the Old Testament Lection for today, but I just didn't think we'd want to enjoy our summer Sunday by listening to it.)

Here's how it goes. God is represented by Hosea in the story. Israel is represented by Hosea's wife, Gomer, who is by trade a prostitute.

As the story goes, God commands Hosea to go and to take Gomer as his wife because God is going to show something about God's relationship with Israel through the marriage. They have three children, who are seen as the fruits of God's relationship with Israel, and right from the start we know it isn't going well because their names are Lo Ruhamah, Lo Ammi, and Jezreel, which translate from the Hebrew into, "not pitied," "not my people," and third child's name references where the whole thing is going to derail completely.

I know, light summer reading, right?

But the reason that Hosea has a good word for us is that it's a story of how God never lets us go.

Now remember, this is an allegory. Gomer, Hosea's wife, finds another man. And then she does it again and again.

That's why the children are named as they are – their names show where this unfaithfulness leads.

Gomer is unfaithful to Hosea just as the Israelites have been unfaithful to God and the fruit of that union will much as the fruit of Gomer and Hosea's: not pitied, not acknowledged.

What a depressing story.

Except that isn't what actually happens.

God *does* take pity. God *does* acknowledge God's people. That's who God is. That's what God is like.

Hosea writes as the Israelites are engaged in dangerous liaisons. Despite God's command that they are to rely on God, they persist in making alliances with first one aggressor nation, and then another. They pit their adversaries against each other.

It works fine for a while. Then one aggressor wins and it's all over.

God can redeem everything and anything, but there isn't in the Bible a promise that God stops the consequences of action. Indeed, quite the opposite is true. Bargain as we may, God doesn't promise to change the outcome.

Sometimes we even bargain because what we want is so good, so clearly in our eyes the better way, the way of wholeness and life doesn't promise us that we won't encounter pain. God doesn't promise us that into our lives grief will not fall.

God promises something much more: that anything and everything is redeemable.

There are so many stories of redemption that we can tell, if we know where to look for them.

They take many forms, sometimes so simple, so easy.

Sometimes the redemption is hard-won, as if God was in the birth-pangs of bringing good out of the worst of our lives.

I think sometimes God brings us together so that we can tell the story of redemption to each other.

I hope you tell your redemption stories. The stories are how we know God.

A number of years ago I heard Tom Long preaching – he's our Montreat speaker this year, and you'll want to hear him, I promise you. And as he was preaching he recounted a story that was told about Karl Barth toward the end of his life.

Many of us have heard the stories of how Barth in his waning years remembered the song *Jesus Loves Me* as the most profound theology he could share. But in this particular interview, Barth said, "All that I have done, I have done endeavoring to make *God* a cheerful word again."

One has to wonder, though, how does *God* become an uncheerful word?

There are a million different ways we could recount, but rather than do so, let me just tell you what they all have in common. Perhaps you'll recognize one from your own life, or

from someone else's. The way we make *God* an uncheerful word is by underestimating how much God loves us.

Which brings us to the Song of Songs, or the Song of Solomon, depending on who you ask. Song of Solomon is the Golden Retriever of Old Testament Books. It is a sloppy, slobbery over-the-top paeon to God's love for humankind.

Song of songs is unrestrained in its joy, which, come to think of it, is how God relates to us.

Yes, there is an element of sexual attraction that is used to describe the relationship between God and Israel.

It's all well and good to intellectualize that and make it clinical, but what it means is that God, who associates sexuality with commitment, is serious about loving us... the relationship of God to the people in Song of Solomon isn't some tawdry one-night-stand, but is rather a durable, passionate, desire of the lover God for the beautiful creation.

I can only imagine it was like water on the parched horizon for the ancient Israelites.

You see, Hosea writes before the people are enslaved, and Song of Songs comes after... the song is the joy of knowing that God is never, ever done. God is always there, always pursuing.

That's sort of the opposite of the parsimonious God. "Lo, the winter is past and the rain is over and gone..."

That's the God Jesus is talking about when he says, "who among you would give a snake when your child asked for a fish?" That's the God Jesus knows when he says, "Who would give a scorpion when a child asked for an egg.?"

Good gifts... always good gifts.

There are no ifs, ands or buts about this.

Do you know that God loves you???

No ifs, ands or buts.

I love this essay that Anne Lamott wrote this week:

“I'd like to sit out in the very quiet courtyard at St. Andrew Presbyterian, with a bowl of cherries, and a bowl of M&M's as communion elements, and talk to people one at a time. I'd teach people what we tell our Sunday School kids, that they are loved and chosen, AS IS. My grandson says things like, "There's another boy in with class with beautiful brown skin, like me." And he's four. If women confided that they don't swim even when it's very hot because they have tummy roll or jiggly thighs, I would show them mine, and we'd go off to swim together in our terrible underwear together, even if it was just in a little kid's inflatable pool in the projects across the street.

If people were grieving, I would sit with them while they cried, and I would not say a single word, like "Time heals all," or "This too shall pass." I would practice having the elegance of spirit to let them cry, and feel [bad] like shit, for as long as they need to, because tears are the way home--baptism, hydration--and I would let our shoulders touch, and every so often I'd point out something beautiful in the sky--a bird, clouds, the hint of a moon. Then we'd share some cherries and/or M&M's, and go find a little kid who would let us swim in his or her inflatable pool. I'd tell the sad person, "Come back next week, I'll be here--and you don't have to feel ONE speck better. It's a come-as-you-are meeting, like with God, who says, "You just show up, my honey."

Also, I would subtly be trying to suck people into coming to St. Andrew on Sunday to worship with us. (services at 11:00.). You will end up feeling TOO loved, and maybe a little overly chosen. It's incredibly sweet.

I would tell people that no matter how awful their thoughts and behavior, God HAS to love them--that's His job. And I am Exhibit A--God has to love me, and this is not my fault. I didn't trick Him or Her, or hide the grossest stuff. God just loves; period. Go figure. It's a great system. My pastor Veronica says that when you want God to enter your life, you don't invite Her to have tea in your living room, which you've completely cleaned for the occasion. You have to invite her all the way in, and let her see the closets, as is, AND--this is the bad news--you have to show her the Bad Drawer. The one in the kitchen, or in your bedside table--you know the one I mean, the one filled with thumbtacks and patches for inner tubes, and the broken dog collar, litter and stuff you couldn't give away--the dump would barely take it--that proves how insane. You have to pull it all the way open, and say, "This is part of the package..." There won't be anything there God doesn't see every day. God, will say, "Dude. Thanks for showing me. Let's get to work. Hey--are the any of those cherries left?"

This to me would be a perfect job, sitting with God and you, at the safest place on the earth for me, being real, together, shoulders touching, looking up at the sky from time to time.”¹

Good gifts, always good gifts. Expect nothing less.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

¹ Taken from Facebook on July 25, 2013. Two paragraphs omitted for brevity.