

Today's readings are all about our relationship with God.

The Hosea reading was written during a time when Israel was straying from God, and the prophet compares that strained relationship to a marriage with an imaginary prostitute (some stumbling blocks there...).

The psalm basically translates to - "God you've done so many great things for us, but now we are afraid you are mad at us, so we hope you'll return this phone call, and if you do, we promise to pick up and listen well and soak up your peace with faithfulness. And then everything is going to be so fantastic!".

The letter to the Colossians is well, also complex....but they are all about relationship. Relationship specifically with God. Each reading in it's own convoluted way.

So, I think we better talk about relationship, but I also think it might be best to start with something a little simpler yet closely akin to our relationship with God;...our relationship with our pets.

If you don't have a pet, I invite you to remember a time in life when you did, and if you *never* had a pet, I invite you to think of someone in your life who does. And I don't mean the fish that you forget about for weeks at a time, I mean a pet you hang out with daily. A pet who impacts the flow of your life in significant ways.

I have a very personable dog. She is a conspicuous aspect of every day of my life since the day she arrived.

I have learned that when I don't pay attention to her, I may end up having a mess to clean up, or a shoe to glue back together, or a portion of dinner goes missing from the counter. So, I watch her closely to see what she might be up to and what she might need.

If she is very quiet, she is either asleep or doing something naughty. A tucked tail either means she's scared, or she really likes her food. A closed mouth means she is feeling watchful and an open mouth and flopping tongue means she's happy, as does the immense wag of her back half.

I listen to her too. A whimper means she wants us to be closer.... or she needs to pee. A deep bark means she wants us to notice what she is noticing ...or she has to poop.

When she hasn't seen us in a while, she washes our faces like we are her long lost puppies. And when she can't believe how much fun we're having she leaps up to hold our hand in her teeth.

So what does any of this have to do with Jesus teaching his disciples how to pray in today's gospel? Well, he's teaching them how to be in relationship with God. How to speak and how to listen to God. He encourages asking for what we need, persistence, and complete faith that God will answer us when we call.

And..... in our various ways of interpreting this gospel, I think we have repeatedly missed the point.

Jesus isn't telling us to wake our neighbors up at midnight to ask for bread, he's saying, God is there to listen and provide at all hours. When your hour of need presents itself, call on God, with persistence.

We've also missed the point, and crushed a number of people's faith, when we interpret "Ask and it shall be given", as "If you pray **faithfully enough** your prayer **will be** answered **precisely as you expect**". Well, we know where those kinds of expectations lead us, don't we?

Anyone who has ever had a day wherein you are trying to get the people you live with to clean the house the way you want the house cleaned (and on your timeframe) has discovered, painfully, that relationship isn't about fulfilling one another's precise requests; it's about presence, communication, affection, collaboration, forgiveness, grace, and love. And, sometimes, doing what our loved ones ask us to do, but not always...

I think when Jesus says "Ask and it will be given", he is saying something more like, "Ask and God will give you *something*; Seek, and new horizons will appear, knock and a door to a deep and beautiful place will open -and if you walk through, hold onto your horses because someone who loves the bajeebies out of you is right through that door." Ask and seek and knock as regularly as you breathe, not transactionally, but relationally.

In bible study this week, Sue R. recalled a time years ago when she was driving and her car began to swerve out of control, as she eased onto the break and rode out the wild wide off the road, mercifully not actually crashing, she realized she had been praying the whole time.

Now I don't know if her prayer is what kept her from crashing into something, but I do believe that her prayer called God immediately to her side. I believe her prayer centered her. And I believe that the fact that her first *reaction in crisis* (before she even had time to think!) was to talk to God indicates that talking to God **is in her** as naturally as breath is in her. Prayer is the water she swims in.

Too often, we think it has to be fancy or formulaic. But God isn't asking for anything more formulated than our non-verbal call for help or more formal than the level of speaking and listening I offer to my puppy. Regular, authentic, affectionate, grateful, sometimes urgent, connective, life-giving, relational.

For we have a very personable God. God wants to be a conspicuous aspect of every day of our lives. I have learned that when I don't pay attention to God, I may end up having a mess to clean up. When I watch closely to see what God might be up to, I get to know God better.

If God is very quiet, I bet They are hoping to hear our voice.

A beautiful sunset, or cool breeze may be an invitation to breathe and relax. A much-needed summer rain, might simply be a love song to God's beloved creation, a Divine purr. An invitation from a friend to join a bible study or go for a hike might be God wanting us to be closer.... or wanting us to know Divine love through one another.

When God hasn't seen us in a while, They rejoice at our return as if we are Their long lost puppies. And when They can't believe how much fun we're having God leaps up and majestic things happen; visibly or invisibly.

This is our God. This is who Jesus came to be, to show us, and to leave us with. Jesus came to teach us how to be in real, right, persistent, every day, humdrum, exhilarating relationship with our Maker. To let our connection to God be the water we swim in. To know in our bones that God is present. To listen, to speak. To hear that collect for purity that we read each Sunday at the start of the service, and know that the words "To whom all hearts are open" refers to *our* hearts!

To be open to whatever response God offers to our prayers. To be open to the evolution of the relationship over time. To go over to a friend's house and bring God along, because leaving God behind in the crate for more than 3 hours doesn't tend to go so well.

Ritual, religion, buildings, stained glass, organs, prayer books, written prayers, these are all tools. Helpful ones, often transcendent and connective ones; but the point, the main point with God, always has been, always will be; relationship, communication, connection, and love. Amen.