

“Try This”

Exodus 17:1-7 & Matthew 21:23-32

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Richard Rohr said, “Many folks over the years, even very good-willed people, have read and listened to my presentations of the Gospel yet have actually done very little – in terms of lifestyle changes, economic or political rearrangements, or naming their own ego or shadow selves. After all, “Isn't church about believing ideas to be true or false? Isn't religion about attending services?” Most people just listen to my ideas and judge them to be true or false. They either “like” or “don't like” them. But thinking about ideas or making judgments about what is moral or immoral seldom leads to a radically new consciousness. Transformative education is not asking you to believe or disbelieve in any doctrines or dogmas. Rather it is challenging you to “Try this!” Then you will know something to be true or false for yourself. So, I will continue to encourage you to try something new: change sides, move outside your comfort zone, make some new contacts, let go of your usual role and attractive self-image, walk instead of drive, make a friend from another race or class, visit new neighborhoods, go to the jail or to the border, attend another church service, etc. Then you can live yourself into new ways of thinking, which then seem so right and necessary that you wonder how you could have ever thought in any other way.”

My spiritual director, John Ackerman, was constantly asking, “Where is God in that? And how can you join God in that?”

We tend to follow routines. Change is challenging. Even good positive change is a difficult journey. God is constantly inviting us to: “try this” way of loving, “try this” slice of joy, “try this” facet of grace, “try this” invigorating aspect of peace. On this World Communion Sunday, we celebrate that God is with all people. We celebrate that God is enormous and diverse who creates each person unique and enjoys connecting with each person in a unique way. God enjoys every good, loving, joyful expression of worship, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Baptist, Quaker, and on and on. There are over thirty-three thousand Christian denominations. Jesus is a dark skinned, middle eastern Jew. The Old Testament proclaims God's love and delight in Muslims. It is likely that God delights in every way God's children worship, love, and rejoice.

Each of us has an infinite array of ways we can worship, love, and rejoice. World Communion Sunday invites us to try new expressions of love. We are invited to let go of our judgements, to let go of categorizing, let go of sorting into good, better, and best; so we can let come, where God is in that and how we can join God in that.

Even good, positive change is scary, hard, uncertain and challenging, even a journey from slavery to freedom is difficult.

Exodus 17:1-7 NLT “At the Lord’s command, the whole community of Israel left the wilderness of Sin and moved from place to place. Eventually they camped at Rephidim, but there was no water there for the people to drink. So once more the people complained against Moses. “Give us water to drink!” they demanded. “Quiet!” Moses replied. “Why are you complaining against me? And why are you testing the Lord?” But tormented by thirst, they continued to argue with Moses. “Why did you bring us out of Egypt? Are you trying to kill us, our children, and our livestock with thirst?” Then Moses cried out to the Lord, “What should I do with these people? They are ready to stone me!” The Lord said to Moses, “Walk out in front of the people. Take your staff, the one you used when you struck the water of the Nile, and call some of the elders of Israel to join you. I will stand before you on the rock at Mount Sinai. Strike the rock, and water will come gushing out. Then the people will be able to drink.” So, Moses struck the rock as he was told, and water gushed out as the elders looked on. Moses named the place Massah (which means “test”) and Meribah (which means “arguing”) because the people of Israel argued with Moses and tested the Lord by saying, “Is the Lord here with us or not?”

Intellectually the Israelites knew God was, is, and will always be with them. They all witnessed the events that set them free from Egypt. They walked through the Red Sea. They ate manna. They were guided by fire and smoke. They knew God was with them. Yet, emotionally, when life gets tough, we all need constant

reassurance from God. When we are thirsty, dry, hurting, nothing is going as planned, we echo the cry, “God are you with us or not?”

I know God is with me. God did all sorts of things and spoke through numerous people to get me to seminary. Three years later, I was on the cusp of graduating, meaning I would no longer have a place for Leslie, baby Spencer and me to live. I had sent out numerous information forms to churches but had not yet received a call. I went backpacking, wrestling with God, screaming, “God are you with me or not?” I was hiking in dense fog. The guidebook indicated that there was beautiful scenery, but I couldn’t see any of it. I sat on a boulder. Suddenly, a wind blew away the cloud revealing spectacular scenery. A wave of peace coursed through me reassuring me that God is with me. Now I can look back and see how God was working, yet at the time it was agonizing. My life is full of these, God are you with me moments. Looking at Abigail in the plastic box in intensive care. God are you with me? My mom lingering for weeks in hospice. God are you with me? Leslie’s hospitalization and search for employment. God are you with me?

Debie Thomas wrote, “Is God among us or not? Foolishly, we ask the question as if its answer should come to us once-and-for-all, so that if God proved God’s existence thunderously enough, we’d never ask for reassurance again. God won’t. And even if God did, this story from Exodus teaches us that we’d ask again, anyway. God are you here, in the messy particulars of our lives. We ask again and again because we need to know again and again. Is God among us now? And now, and now, and now? In the parched marriage, the gut-wrenching diagnosis, the shrinking paycheck, the untimely death? In the war zone, the brothel, the earthquake, the drought? In the scorching, shape-shifting deserts God leads us into and out of for reasons we often don’t understand—is God among us or not? To ask it is to register our need, our yearning, and our hope. To ask it is to journey into radical freedom, knowing that the God of both wilderness and water has compassion enough for our questions. To our perpetual surprise, God is always with us.”

Perhaps it is when one stops asking, “God are you with us?” that we become most lost and stuck. Certain priest and elders were certain that God was with them. And God indeed was with them. They were certain that their way of worship is the only right way, certain that their way of believing was the only right way. Their doctrine, tradition, ritual, routine enslaved them. They judged. Over the years they became unable to “try this” in the radical ministry of John the Baptist who was loving and serving outside the church, with long hair and a strange diet. And his clothes, those baggy and saggy camel’s hair shorts were much too low. He preached about forgiveness, change, and new beginnings. He preached about radical love. He invited people to “try this” expression of grace. They failed to ask themselves, “Where is God in John and his ministry? And how can we join God in that?” They failed to try any of it.

Matthew 21:23-32 NLT “When Jesus returned to the Temple and began teaching, the leading priests and elders came up to him. They demanded, “By what authority are you doing all these things? Who gave you the right?” “I’ll tell you by what authority I do these things if you answer one question,” Jesus replied. “Did John’s authority to baptize come from heaven, or was it merely human?” They talked it over among themselves. “If we say it was from heaven, he will ask us why we didn’t believe John. But if we say it was merely human, we’ll be mobbed because the people believe John was a prophet.” So, they finally replied, “We don’t know.” And Jesus responded, “Then I won’t tell you by what authority I do these things. “But what do you think about this? A man with two sons told the older boy, ‘Son, go out and work in the vineyard today.’ The son answered, ‘No, I won’t go,’ but later he changed his mind and went anyway. Then the father told the other son, ‘You go,’ and he said, ‘Yes, sir, I will.’ But he didn’t go. “Which of the two obeyed his father?” They replied, “The first.” Then Jesus explained his meaning: “I tell you the truth, corrupt tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the Kingdom of God before you do. For John the Baptist came and showed you the right way to live, but you didn’t believe him, while tax collectors and prostitutes did. And even when you saw this happening, you refused to believe him and repent of your sins.”

God continually calls the church, and you, away from the safety of rigid beliefs, narrow doctrine, familiar tradition and routine worship for they often lead to segregation, self-righteousness and judgement. They enslave us. God is calling the church, and you, to try ever bolder grace, ever more extravagant love and ever more sumptuous joy. We are invited to change, to turn, to be transformed. Our transformation is glorious and unsettling with plenty of “God are you with me” moments on the journey. Andrew Greeley said. “If one wishes to eliminate uncertainty, tension, confusion, and disorder from one’s life, there is no point in getting mixed up

with Yahweh or with Jesus of Nazareth” Richard Rohr wrote. “Jesus found God in disorder and imperfection—and told us that we must do the same or we would never be content on this earth.” Kent Nerburn said. “Traces of the sacred are everywhere before our eyes, and our task, as surely as performing acts of worship, is to find these sacred moments, hallow them with our attention, and raise them up as a celebration of the mystery of life.”

God is working in everyone, in ways that are often invisible to us, in ways that often don't fit into The Book of Order, our Confessions, or creeds. The view we take to understand who is really doing God's work may sometimes be misleading. A young pastor was only at church a couple of weeks when he was called to do his first funeral. The person who had died was not a church member. She was, in fact, someone with a bad reputation. The pastor could find no one with a good word to offer about this woman—until he entered the town's small, grocery store on the day before the funeral. The pastor began talking to the store owner about his sadness that the first person he would bury was to be someone about which nothing good was ever said. The owner opened the accounts receivable, covering the names listed in the left-hand column, he pointed to grocery bills written in red: orders that people had bought on credit; and then to the column that showed how each bill had been paid. He said, “Every month, Gladys would come in and ask me who was behind on their grocery bills. It was usually some family who had suffered sickness or a death—or some poor woman trying to feed her kids when her husband drank up the money. Gladys would pay their bill, and she made me swear never to tell. But I figure, now that she is dead, people ought to know—especially those who benefited from her charity, of whom some have been her biggest critics.

Matthew Skinner wrote, “If God is active and discoverable in the efforts of someone like John, a wild-eyed long-toiling prophet who sets up camp in the wilderness calling for a new world to come into being, a world marked by grace, inclusiveness, mended relationships, changed lives, and a recognition that God intends for more than just the continuation of an ongoing and corrosive status quo ... then perhaps people who care about religious language, symbols, practices, and truth claims should be curious people, bent on keeping their eyes open for ways in which God might be made known, or ways in which the purposes of God might be expressed. In other words, saying “Yes” to God should lead a person to say “Yes” to looking for God and “Yes” to getting engaged in God's business—the business of seeing to the flourishing of grace, peace, reconciliation, sharing, joy, restoration, and forgiveness. That's why Jesus, in his parable and in his words immediately after it, praises “tax collectors and prostitutes”—people who by most appearances have not claimed to say “Yes” to God but have nevertheless responded to or found their place within God's activity. A life of “working in the vineyard” is about playing one's part in God's ongoing work and enjoying God's benefits.” It is joining God in what God is doing in our midst.

Change is always happening. Our futures are not determined by our choices from the past. None of us is trapped in the life we are living. Like the first son in the parable, we are free to change our mind and serve God. God has designed us for change. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, Emmanuel, God always with us, we enter the vineyard to try new ways of loving, rejoicing, forgiving and serving. We are invited to taste and see in new ways that God is good.

Try new ways to love others. Do Hands-On Mission, teach, join a choir, serve on the hospitality or tech team. Volunteer at a school or a charity. Reconcile a relationship. Become friends with someone with different beliefs. Try new ways to love God, walk the labyrinth, sing different music, ask another about their favorite way to worship and join them, savor God's creation at a place you never visited, discover a gift God has given you through a new hobby, tell God thank you in new forms, let go and let come change.

Keep asking Where is God in that? How can I join God in that? Accept God's invitation to “try this”?
Amen