

Sermon: "The School of Hard Knocks"
Scripture Readings - Hosea 1:2-10, Luke 11:1-13
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Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Springfield, IL

Our first scripture reading is Hosea 1:2-10. The book of Hosea is rich in imagery and symbolic action. The prophet is commanded to marry a "wife of whoredom" and to have "children of whoredom." This action sets up a variety of comparisons among the prophet, his wife Gomer, their children, and her lovers on the one hand, and God, Israel, the land, and competing fertility gods on the other hand. However, the comparisons do not lead to clear and precise analogies... and this negative imagery depicting female sexuality has sadly been perpetuated within religious language through the centuries. The good news in this marriage metaphor is that in spite of "the School of Hard Knocks" Hosea persevered in his marriage to Gomer, and his faithfulness symbolizes the steadfast love and faithfulness of God to Israel. Hear now the word of the Lord through the prophet Hosea.

² 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." ³ So he went and took Gomer daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son. ⁴ 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. ⁵ On that day I will break the bow of Israel in the valley of Jezreel." ⁶ She conceived again and bore a daughter. Then the LORD said to him, "Name her Lo-ruhamah^h for I will no longer have pity on the house of Israel or forgive them. ⁷ 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." ⁸ When she had weaned Lo-ruhamah, she conceived and bore a son. ⁹ Then the LORD said, "Name him Lo-ammi, for you are not my people and I am not your God." ...¹⁰ 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." Amen.

Our second reading is Luke 11:1-13. Luke includes teachings on prayer within his travel narratives as Jesus gets closer to his destiny of Jerusalem. In the previous chapter Jesus taught a new standard of hospitality in the parable of the *Good Samaritan* and enjoyed the hospitality of Mary and Martha in their home. In today's reading Jesus offers the *Lord's Prayer* to the disciples who ask how to pray after observing the richness of Jesus' prayer life. Two short parables follow to emphasize the steadfast character of the One to whom we pray. The parables are to be understood in the context of middle-eastern hospitality. The thought of a neighbor not lending a loaf of bread for one's guest or a parent giving a stone instead of bread to a child is unthinkable. Listen to God's Word as recorded by Luke.

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." ² He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. ³ Give us each day our daily bread. ⁴ And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial."⁵ And Jesus 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; ⁶ for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.'⁷ 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.’⁸ 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.⁹ “So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who seeks finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ¹¹ Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for^[e] a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? ¹² Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? ¹³ 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^[d] to those who ask him!” Amen.

The title of the sermon: The School of Hard Knocks

The text: “For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who seeks finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.” Luke 11: 10

Let us pray: Holy and Loving God, as we reflect together on who you are, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our strength and redeemer. Amen.

Six years ago today I preached the candidacy sermon to serve as Westminster’s eighteenth pastor. It was a culminating day in my long ministry as an associate pastor and an opportunity which I had sought for many years...asking, seeking, and knocking on the door of congregations hoping one would welcome my leadership as head of staff. My husband Peter and our son Paul had accompanied me on the turns and forks in that road less traveled and encouraged me in the disappointments and challenges along the way.

The sermon I chose to preach that day was entitled “To Run and Not Be Weary” based on Isaiah 40. It ended with an illustration from my 2011 Lily Grant Sabbatical. Peter, Paul and I had visited the Deportation Museum, which is a memorial to the 200,000 French Victims of the Nazi Concentration Camps, located behind Notre Dame in Paris. As we sat in silence and in the solemnity of this heart wrenching experience at a nearby park, a children’s choir began singing Leonard Cohen’s “Hallelujah.” Eleanor Van Deventer kindly sang “Hallelujah” following the sermon that day with Lyle accompanying her on his saxophone. Dale Rogers was traveling in England. It was a powerful and poignant moment for me sitting in Westminster’s stunning chancel for the first time. I will forever be grateful to this gracious congregation for the opportunity to lead and to collaborate with the members of this gifted community.

The year after my arrival on my birthday and in recognition of my service, I was presented a framed degree from “The School of Hard Knox” which proudly hangs in my personal bathroom. The diploma was a gift from Judy and Todd Knox and a clever play on their last name. The degree of “Doctor of All Souls” from the School of Hard Knox is signed by each of them: Todd as Chancellor and Judy as the Dean of Students.

The term “School of Hard Knocks,” also referred to as the “University of Life,” is an idiomatic phrase alluding to the education one receives from life’s painful and difficult experiences. The term originated in the United States with its first reference in the 1870 book entitled *The Men Who Advertise*. The author writes about one of the characters:

“...Trained in the school of hard knocks, he learned the theory of success.”

The phrase claims a level of wisdom imparted by life experience, which is at least equal in merit to academic knowledge. I think most of us would agree that nothing teaches us quite like life itself... those hard knocks can make us stronger and kinder, less judgmental and more open to others. The Apostle Paul referenced hard knocks when he wrote: *“Suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”*

The theory of the School of Hard Knocks is not intended to wish painful or difficult experiences on anyone for the benefit of their education. Neither does it romanticize suffering, and it certainly acknowledges that not everyone learns and grows from difficult life experiences.

Part of the power in the prophet Hosea’s message is the way it is intertwined with his life experience. The symbolic marriage between Hosea and Gomer and her infidelity alludes to the fertility religion which was competing with faithfulness to the covenantal relationship with Yahweh. Once we get beyond the negative association between infidelity with female sexuality and the hard knocks women have endured over the years because of this kind of biblical rhetoric, the final word from Hosea is about God’s faithfulness. Because of who God is, because of God’s character, God remains faithful even to those men and women who are unfaithful and who turn away.

The God who created the world, the God who is beyond our understanding is the God who is willing to turn “not my people” into the “children of the living God” and who opens the door in the middle of the night when the neighbor knocks. This is the God who listens to and answers our prayers and who never gives up on us.

Luke reminds us that prayer strengthened and empowered Jesus for the hard knocks of his life, particularly these last days as he approached Jerusalem and the cross that awaited him. When Jesus’ disciples asked him about prayer he offered a simple prayer which reflected his understanding of who God is and all God wants to give us. Then he shared two parables to remind us that God wants nothing but the best for us and that God will be faithful not because of anything we do but because of who God is.

In Jesus’ time, it would be unthinkable that a request for bread to serve a guest in the middle of the night would be denied. We are told even the inhospitable neighbor will eventually respond, not so much because of *persistence*, as inferred by the NRSV translation, but to *avoid the shame* that would accompany the refusal in middle-eastern culture which places so much value on hospitality. If even an insensitive neighbor will respond to avoid shame, how much more will the God of hospitality gladly give us? In the same way, what parent will deny nourishment to their child and give a snake when he asks for a fish or a stone instead of bread?

No, Jesus’ advice on prayer is simply this. Ask and you shall receive, seek and you shall find, knock hard and the door will be opened! Be diligent and persistent in spending time with your Maker! Hosea and Luke were right. We have a God like none other. We have a God who hears our cries during the difficult and painful experiences of our lives. God’s ability to nourish, to be faithful, and to forgive is beyond the measure of our mind, and we are invited, as graduates of the School of Hard Knocks, to be a part of God’s generosity—in the giving and receiving within our lives and in the respect we give to the neighbors who knock on our door. As the living children of God we have confidence, because of who God is, in the hope that will not disappoint us. Hallelujah! Amen.