

Honest to God Prayer
Matthew 23:14
Job 16:1-17
Jeremiah 20:7-18

Have you found, has it been your experience that Christians get on your nerves?

A lot of Christians get on my nerves.-----Really, they do. It's a fact. They can cause me to get my dander up, cause my stomach to get all knotted up, cause me to fantasize about shaking some sense into them. One reason I love Wedgewood so much is unlike the other Christians you don't make me want to jump off a cliff or make me want to scream bloody murder. But there are some Christians, well, if I had to be their Pastor I think I'd-----I think I'd say thanks but no thanks.

That those other Christians get on my last nerves, though, says as much about me as it says about them. Do you realize that? The people that get on our nerves may reveal as much about us and our issues as it reveals about them.

And that's one reason I'm trying to do better, that's one reason I'm giving it the "old college try", that's one reason I don't slap those Christians silly even though my dark side would really like to do it.----- Yes, I'm attempting to be more tolerant of people in the traditional steeples but I'm not having much success. It's just so dang hard. And there's one big roadblock, one hurdle I just can't seem to get over. One of the things that makes it so difficult for me to love the Christians is because, as homo sapiens go, I haven't find the Christians to be a very honest people. Dishonesty bugs me.

Christians are supposed to be honest, aren't they?

When it comes to the Bible, for example, they aren't honest. They aren't honest when they accuse others of picking and choosing and deny that they do too. They aren't honest when they say they believe the whole Bible because that is theoretically impossible because the Bible has conflicting theologies within it forcing us to pick and choose. They say the Bible is inerrant and infallible when Jesus himself didn't believe all the Bible. And if you ever corner them they say "Well, we just aren't supposed to know everything." Or they read things into the text that aren't there to solve biblical interpretation problems. It's all very unsatisfactory, and worse, dishonest, which bugs, bugs, bugs me.

They are not honest about the Bible and, surprise, surprise, they are not honest about themselves. Saints, God's saints, they say they are. Sinners is what everybody else is who doesn't think, act or smell like them. But no one is fooled. Outward appearances may suggest purity, big religious talk may portend sanctity, but they aren't any different from the Apostle Paul who long after God knocked him off a donkey said, "The good I want to do, I don't do. And for the record, the bad I don't want to do is what I end up doing." Show me a Christian claiming perfection and I'll show you a Christian mired deep in illusion and delusion and hallucination, their purity a figment of their imagination.

At Wedgewood we say in our mission statement that we are an imperfect church for an imperfect world. We say everybody is welcome at Wedgewood except perfect people. We say we don't want anyone messing up our record.

Christians dishonest about themselves, dishonest about the Bible, and this is one of my pet peeves: dishonest in their practice of prayer. Oh boy does that one rub me raw! Listening to their prayers for me is like listening to screeching chalk on a chalkboard. Listening to their prayers for me is like drinking that God awful concoction you have to drink before having a colonoscopy. Listening to their prayers-----have you ever been sea sick?-----listening to their prayers is right up there with sea sickness? Help me Jesus. Help me Jesus survive this Christian's prayer.-----I find traditional Christian prayers to be syrupy, sugary, honeyed, 100% praise or request with little or no sharing of honest feelings, with little or no complaint or anger or doubt or confrontation with God. I often get the impression Christian prayers are prayed to convince those listening of one's holiness more than being an honest exchange or conversation with God.

Write this down. Let me tell you something. You can't have a good relationship with someone unless you can be honest.

How many relationships have you had that have gone sour, turned south, in part or to a large degree, because you or the other individual weren't being honest, honest about who you are or how you felt or what you wanted to do?

How honest are you with your spouse or partner or boyfriend or girlfriend?

How honest are you with your parents?

How honest are you with your best friends?

Now I'm not stupid, contrary to public opinion. I know we can't reveal all of ourselves to everybody. I know that. And I'm aware that the opening up of ourselves to others is a process.

I like what Mike McCurry, President Clinton's press secretary, said. "Sometimes the art of being press secretary is the art of telling the truth slowly."

Telling the truth slowly.

Yes, certain situations call for the truth to be told slowly, but do you find you spend more of your energy hiding your true self, concealing your true self, masking your thoughts and feelings, or do you obtain intimacy by revealing the in's and out's of your soul? Are you more hidden or more revealed?

I know what our fear is. We fear rejection. Hey, rejection isn't fun. No one wants to be rejected. But who wants to present a false self either. Who wants supposed acceptance at the cost of realness? Who wants to pretend all their life?

And what I am suggesting is that hiding our true selves with God is just as detrimental as hiding our true selves with human beings. You cannot be close to God, you cannot have an intimate relationship with God, unless---unless you can be frank and open and honest.

How honest are you able to be with God? Ever shared any of your anger with God? Have you let God in on your doubts of and disappointments with God?

Now I know in the Old Testament there are examples of people telling God what they thought, examples of people complaining to God, and God zapped them right then and there. ZAPPOOOOOOOO! Those passages, my friends, are not accurate portrayals of God. Erase them from your theological library!

Do you realize a good third of the Psalms are complaints? Yeah, complaints, good old fashioned griping, good old real McCoy bellyaching. You can call it “whining with just cause” if you want to. Call it whatever you want to call it but it’s there and it’s there repeatedly.

Where are you God? Hello. Why have you abandoned me? If you are the big God you say you are why are you letting all this happen to me? Don’t you care? Aren’t you aware of my situation? Aren’t you going to do anything about it? What’s the use in worshipping you if life is going to be like this?

The Psalms. You might want to read them some time and discover that the current trend on praise worship is only presenting half of the truth. And while you are reading the Bible let me suggest for your examination the book of Job. Job is a put your cards on the table, lay it on your liver type of guy. He doesn’t pull any punches. While his friends mouth off the traditional religious mumbo jumbo, while his friends always praise God and let God off the hook, Job lays his case out against God.

Now it’s true that late in the book God pulls rank on Job and in response to Job’s bellyaching asks, “Where were you when I created the world?” In effect God says, “If you could have done a better job Job why didn’t you make the stars and the sun and the animals and all the rest of it?” Yes, God shuts Job up, but don’t miss the ending of the book. Go home this afternoon and read the final chapters and be amazed---be amazed that God says that Job has said what is right while his friends, his friends, the very ones defending God and accusing Job---God says Job is right and his so-called friends are wrong. Read it. Don’t take my word for it. Read it this afternoon.

Job wasn’t patient. He was honest. He was honest to God and to his friends and to himself.

Even more confrontational with God than Job is the prophet Jeremiah. Sometimes I have to pinch myself when I read Jeremiah 20 because it’s so radical. You’ve probably missed this, no fault of your own, but you’ve probably missed this radicalness in Jeremiah because translators have a way of cleaning up the text, if you know what I mean. They smooth out the rough edges, hide what is embarrassing.

We read in the 20th chapter in the clean up version that Jeremiah tells God this: “O Lord, thou has deceived me, and I was deceived.” Well, that’s a pretty strong statement even being cleaned

up. It amounts to calling God a liar. But in Hebrew the word translated “deceive” actually has sexual overtones so that it might be better translated “O Lord, you have seduced me.” Or, “O Lord, you have raped me.” See the difference. Hear the anger. Hear the disillusionment. Hear the honesty.

Have you ever been that honest with God?

You know what we do? Will complains about this all the time. We’ll have company coming over and we’ll straighten up the house before they come. Do you that? Will says we are giving them a false impression. It’s his way of trying to get out of work, but----my point is that’s what we do when we pray sometimes. We only present a clean house when the reality is roaches have been on the floor and dog hair has been on the carpet and the sink has had some stains. What if we didn’t clean up before we talked to God? What if we left our negative thoughts and our dark emotions out for God to see? What if God is a big enough God, a God who wants intimacy and realness so much, that God can handle whatever we have to share be it feelings of being raped by God or seduced by God or deceived by God.

Complete and total honesty with God. You ought to try it.

And you ought to try it with a few trusted people also. I would add you ought to try it with a counselor. I believe all of us could benefit from a minimum of a year’s counseling.

The great thing about going to therapy is you can be totally honest perhaps for the first time in your life. I look at it this way. If the counselor isn’t confidential, I’ve got a great legal case on your hands. The counselor is going to protect your privacy. Here’s a safe place to put it all on the table. I look at this way. I’m hiring the counselor. I can fire the counselor. It’s really a win situation. Because when you are honest with a counselor and learn to be honest with yourself it frees you, liberates you, to be honest with others.

Anne Lamot shares this observation. She writes: “I was raised to keep all the family secrets and present myself in such a way that people would be either envious or approving. But keeping up a façade like that takes so much energy.

When my friend Pammy was going through hemotherapy, and I asked her if the dress I was wearing made me look fat, I was making a fuss about the dumbest things, and Pammy looked at me and said, ‘Annie, you just don’t have that kind of time.’ It was so profound, it was like I was in a cartoon and somebody conked me over the head. I got it.

Pammy died seven years ago. But I still live by her words: You don’t have time to live a lie. You don’t have time to get the world to approve of you. You only have the time to become the person you dream of being. You only have the time to accept yourself as you are and start getting a little bit healthier so you can be who God needs you to be. In a way, it’s exhilarating to say, ‘This is really who I am, and I’m not going to pretend just because I have the sneaking suspicion I’m not good enough.’”

Honesty. Realness.

Theologian Matthew Fox tells the story of a Catholic Sister in Chicago who worked with women in prison. She told the women she had funds which could either get them a good lawyer to review their cases and possibly get them out sooner; or she could bring in a welder to teach them welding so they could have a skill when they left; or she could get a dancer and a painter to come teach them to dance and paint. Ninety-five percent chose the dancer or painter. Why? Because they said it would be the first time in their lives they would have a chance to express themselves.

Honesty. I invite you to have a Christianity, a spirituality, characterized by honesty.

Speaking of honesty, I'd like to be honest right now. Jean Higdon died last week. I hate some of you didn't get to know Jean. She developed a bad, bad case of Alzheimer's and was no longer able to live in her house or come to this house of worship. Anyway, here's my honesty with God.

I've got a bone to pick with God. I feel robbed. All of us who knew Jean, I am guessing, feel robbed. And it's not that our pockets have been picked. No this robbery is a major heist. Alzheimer's robbed us for too many years of the Jean Higdon we knew and loved and enjoyed. Robbed. How else can we describe it? And it's not right. It's just not right. It's not right that someone with such a good mind, someone for whom a thinking faith was so important, it's not right that they would not be able to think. So in the spirit of the Psalmists who let God know all that was on their minds, the Psalmists who wanted to know where in the Sam Hill God was and why wasn't he doing something to correct a situation, and in the spirit of Job who wouldn't swallow the traditional answers and explanations about suffering, wouldn't swallow the theological babbling, and yes in the spirit of Jean Higdon who opened her Bible but never closed her brain, I'll put it simply. For a period of time we were robbed. And I just wanted you God to know it wasn't right at all that what happened to Jean happened. It wasn't right that you allowed it to happen.

Honesty. Honest to God prayer. It could change your life.