

“The Gospel According to Rick Steves, Or, Seeing God in Surprising Places (Even Church!)”  
 Proper 12C (July 28, 2019)  
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>>Put a hand on our shoulder and point us in the right direction. Put our hand on someone’s shoulder and let it matter. Amen.<<

Back in March, Sam Anderson of *The New York Times Magazine* published a long article on travel guru Rick Steves.<sup>1</sup> Many of you know Rick Steves from his PBS show “Rick Steves’ Europe” - a show which has, writes Sam Anderson, established Steves over the past two decades as “one of the legendary PBS superdorks - right there in the pantheon with Mr. Rogers, Bob Ross, and Big Bird. Like them, Steves is a gentle soul who wants to help you feel at home in the world. Like them, he seems miraculously untouched by the need to look cool, which of course makes him sneakily cool. To the aspiring traveler, Steves is as inspirational as Julia Child once was to the aspiring home chef.”

Rick Steves is an expert traveler, writes Anderson. He “can tell you how to avoid having your pocket picked on the subway in Istanbul. He can tell you where to buy cookies from cloistered Spanish nuns on a hilltop in Andalusia. He can tell you approximately what percentage of Russia’s gross domestic product comes from bribery. He can teach you the magic idiom that unlocks perfectly complementary gelato flavors in Florence ... .” And “Rick Steves is absolutely American,” writes Anderson.” “He wears jeans every single day. He drinks frozen orange juice from a can. He likes his hash browns burned, his coffee extra hot. He dislikes most fancy restaurants; when he’s on the road, he prefers to buy a foot-long Subway sandwich and split it between lunch and dinner. He has a great spontaneous honk of a laugh ... with the sharpness of a firecracker on the Fourth of July. ... On Sundays, Steves wears his jeans to church, where he plays the congas ... [for a] soft-rock band ... before the service starts, and then he sits down and sings classic Lutheran hymns without even needing to refer to the hymnal.” ... “And yet,” Anderson continues, “Rick Steves desperately wants you to leave America. The tiniest exposure to the outside world, he believes, will change your entire life. Travel, Steves likes to say, ‘wallops your ethnocentricity’ and ‘carbonates your experience’ and ‘rearranges your cultural furniture.’ ... He wants you ... [to] taste authentic Italian gelato ... , to hike on a dirt path along a cliff over the almost-too-blue Mediterranean ... . He wants you to arrive at the Parthenon at dusk, just before it closes, when all the tour groups are loading back onto their cruise ships, so that you have the whole place to yourself ... . [He] wants you to get way down deep into the culture, to eat with locals in the teeming markets ... , to get entirely lost in your lack of America. ...”

Sam Anderson calls this walloping of ethnocentricity and this carbonating of experience and this rearranging of cultural furniture “the gospel of Rick Steves.” It was when he was 14 years old that Rick Steves took his first trip to Europe, and while standing in a park in Oslo he had an epiphany. “Right there,” he wrote in his journal, “my 14-year-old egocentric worldview took a huge hit ... , [and I realized that] ‘this planet must be home to billions of equally lovable children of God.’” “Travel,” according to the Gospel of Rick Steves, “is an engine for improving humankind, for connecting people and removing their prejudices, for knocking distant cultures together to make unlikely sparks of joy and insight.”

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/03/20/magazine/rick-steves-travel-world.html>

Summer is a fine time to talk about Rick Steves, since many of us will be traveling for vacation, perhaps not as far away as Europe - and that's probably a blessing given the extreme heat over there this week - but we might travel somewhere beyond Ithaca where we'll encounter people from different places with different perspectives in different situations in life: we'll encounter difference. But, of course, even if you aren't traveling this summer, living in Ithaca affords all of us the opportunity to meet people from around the world - the world comes to our little corner of New York State because of the university a few blocks away - and our encounter with people just might wallop ethnocentricity and carbonate experience and rearrange cultural furniture.

Today's Old Testament reading is about the Hebrew prophet Hosea being put by God in a situation that rearranged his cultural and religious furniture. As with so many other Old Testament prophets, very little is known about Hosea. His name in Hebrew means "salvation." He lived in the 8th century BCE. And like the other prophets, Hosea's belly was filled with fire and his words like daggers - words spoken in fits of rage to the religious and political powers of the day. And like the prophets - Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel - Hosea engaged in what can only be called "street theatre" to communicate his message. Isaiah walked around naked while he preached - a street-level demonstration of shame to shame the powers of his day for promoting injustice. Jeremiah carried around the yolk of an ox - a bit of street theatre - to act out the yolk of foreign rule that, he said, would soon be placed on the shoulders of the people. Ezekiel cooked food on cow dung, and he made a model city of Jerusalem and crouched down wagging his finger at it in the middle of the street, and he dug a hole in the side of his house and crawled through it in full sight of passersby - street demonstrations to warn the people that they their city would soon be encircled by foreign armies, their resources would run out - hence the need to cook food on manure instead of wood - and their only means of escape would be to dig tunnels and then sneak through walls. All of these prophets were ordered by God to embarrass themselves by doing street theatre. Hosea too. God's first command to this unfortunate prophet - at the beginning of today's reading - was that he marry a prostitute who would be, said God, an unfaithful partner to symbolize how Israel at the time was being unfaithful in its partnership with God. Hosea and his wife would have three children - each with a symbolic name. The first child was named "Jezreel" after a place in the Bible where blood was shed and property stolen (Jezreel symbolizes lawlessness); the second child was named "Lo-ruhamah," which means in Hebrew, "no mercy" (Lo-ruhamah symbolizes that God's patience has run out); and the third child was named "Lo-ammi," which means in Hebrew, "not my people" (Lo-ammi symbolizes a severed partnership between God and the people).

Hosea the prophet - his family a public demonstration of God's fraught relationship with the people. Hosea the prophet - belly filled with fire and churning rage. Tongue like a dagger. Using the language of a lawsuit, Hosea tells the people in one place in this book that "the Lord has a case" against them, especially against the leaders - the priests and the kings - who, says, Hosea, are guilty of corruption and greed, disloyalty and lying. Their oaths - their swearing of allegiance to God and country - are worthless, rails Hosea; the national leaders have plowed wickedness, he says, and reaped injustice; they've sowed the wind, he says, and will reap the whirlwind. They're guilty of treason, says Hosea, speaking for God. (One can only imagine what a 21st century Hosea might say to our leaders in Washington.)

Sometimes after reading such texts from the Old Testament, we in the Christian tradition, run to the New Testament for comfort, believing that the God of the Old Testament is wrathful and violent while the God of the New Testament is more compassionate and nice. But Hosea actually challenges and contradicts this split between the testaments. For all of its fire and ire, sprinkled throughout Hosea's book are some of the most beautiful statements in the Bible about a compassionate and parental God - a God who treats all people as, to borrow words from Rick Steves, "equally lovable."

The final verse of today's Hosea reading reverses the three terrible names of Hosea's children with words from God about abundance and grace: "in the place where it was said," writes Hosea, "'You are not my people [Lo-ammi]', it shall instead be said, 'children of the living God'." In fact, after every indictment leveled by this fiery prosecuting attorney of a prophet - after every indictment in this book - God interjects, speaking through Hosea, to promise grace. "How can I give you up?" says God. "My heart recoils at the thought." "My compassion grows warm and tender for you." "I will heal you," says God. "I will love you," says God. "I'm your parent," says God. "I taught you to walk." "I took you in my arms." "I have pampered you." "I bent down to feed you." "I will draw you close in cords of kindness and gentleness," says God. (All of these are direct quotes from this ancient book.) If God is like a parent, as Hosea claims, then what parent hasn't been angry at their child at some point? But if God is a *loving* parent, as Hosea claims, then God could never disown her children, since each one is "equally lovable."

You know, I suppose travel in the Rick Steves way can wallop ethnocentricity and carbonate experience and rearrange cultural furniture, can teach us, as Steves learned, that "'this planet [is] home to billions of equally lovable children of God.'" But maybe all of this can also happen in much closer settings. Maybe we can learn to be patient and compassionate like the Parent God in Hosea, and learn to treat each person as equally lovable children of God, and be pulled out of our comfort zones - get walloped and carbonated and rearranged - when we sit beside someone in church. Maybe all of this - this patience and compassion, this treating of fellow human beings as equals, this pull outside of our comfort zones - is, as Reverend Lillian Daniel writes in her book *When "Spiritual But Not Religious" Is Not Enough*<sup>2</sup> - as "close," she writes, "as the guy singing out of tune right next to [us] ... , as close as the baby screaming [in the back pew] ... . It's as close," writes Daniel, "as [the] mother who crawled out an inch from the heavy shell of postpartum depression to get herself here today and wonders if there is a place for her. It's as close," she continues, "as the woman sitting next to [that mother], who grieves that she will never give birth to a child and eyes that [screaming] baby with envy. ... [A]s close as the [worshiper] who is so thirsty for a word, [he] leans forward for absolutely anything. It's as close as the teenager who walked here to church alone, seeking something more than gratitude, something more than newspapers and coffee [on a Sunday morning] ... , [and] gets caught up in the beauty of something bigger than his own invention." The beautiful mess of humanity is right next to us, capable of teaching us patience and compassion, the equal value of fellow human beings, able to pull us outside of our comfort zones.

Reverend Daniel goes on to tell a story about her time serving a small New England congregation that illustrates the power of this kind of community sharing space on Sundays.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Lillian Daniel, *When "Spiritual But Not Religious" Is Not Enough: Seeing God in Surprising Places, Even the Church* (New York: Jericho Books, 2013), 13-14.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel, *When "Spiritual But Not Religious" Is Not Enough*, 14-17.

“At a historic Congregational church in New England,” she writes, “I had the pleasure of leading the church through a big anniversary celebration of the laying of the cornerstone of our third church building. This church had gone through some rough times, two church splits, some angry and painful departures of ministers, but things had been looking up and we were ready to celebrate. We took two years gearing up for it, and in that last year all sorts of committees were at work, planning a special worship service, the choir rehearsing special anthems, guest speakers and half the church involved in cooking a feast, which, in the tradition of our Pilgrim forebears, would naturally be lasagna and garlic bread. It was going to be great. And then just about a month before the big day, it came to our volunteer church historian’s attention that there had been a mistake in calculating the date. We had the wrong year. Our building’s seventy-fifth anniversary had been the year before. There were hastily-called meetings, not official ones but those unofficial ones ... in the church where they pull one another aside in the bathroom to say, ‘Did you hear?,’ whispers at choir rehearsal and in the parking lot, those kind of meetings, serious debates among the long-term members as to whether or not we ought to even mention this mistake to anybody, or were we obligated to confess our error to the entire congregation? But we were a small church and by the time you had asked enough people whether or not we should make public the news that we had missed our own anniversary, it was pretty much public already. In fact, I even had some other minister colleagues calling me up from other churches where the news had spread to say, ‘Really? Really? Your whole church missed its own anniversary?’ ... By the time we arrived at the next church council meeting, everybody knew but no one had discussed it in any official way and the big anniversary Sunday was around the corner. Would there be blame, embarrassment, frustration, or forgiveness? Finally in that reserved New England way, when we came to the regular agenda item that had for the last eighteen months been listed as ‘Anniversary activities,’ somebody said, without emotion, ‘And now we come to the small matter of the anniversary date of our church building, or perhaps we should say the actual anniversary date as opposed to the assumed date we have all been working with, and what should be done about said matter.’ There was a long and awkward silence. And then finally someone said, ‘Well, I’ve done some research, and it turns out that it took them quite a while to complete the building after they laid the cornerstone. In fact, by the time the building was finished it was no longer the year they started, but it was a year later. So you see, it all depends on what this is the anniversary of. I mean, you can celebrate the anniversary of laying a cornerstone, but that’s hardly fitting. Wouldn’t it be more fitting to celebrate the anniversary of the completion of the building?’ Someone else chimed in, ‘Not the completion of the building, but the first worship service in it. That had to be that next year. I mean who celebrates the anniversary of a building? It’s all about the people.’ ‘Why, you’re right, that makes so much sense,’ [said someone else]. ‘I can’t believe we didn’t see it this way from the very beginning.’ ... So in a bit of revisionist history,” writes Lillian Daniel, “... our story changed from being a church that had wanted to celebrate the cornerstone of the building to a church that had always intended to celebrate the first worship service. And after some more whispered updates at the choir rehearsals, in the bathroom, and around the parking lot, it was never mentioned again. This had always been our anniversary plan and it always would be.”

I love this story because it’s a story of mistakes and a story of grace, a story of dealing with the complexities of living in relationship with people - having perspectives walloped and carbonated and rearranged - and a story about how the community that is a church can be a place where we learn the Gospel of Rick Steves: that, in spite of our quirks, all of us are equally lovable. Amen.