

***Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith* by Rob Bell**

Week 1: Introduction (April 23 & 24)

1. In the Introductory chapter, Rob Bell uses a metaphor of a Velvet Elvis painting. How does this metaphor relate to our relationship with God?
2. When you hear the word Christian, what do you think of? When people read the word Christian in the newspaper, what might they think of? How do you think these views are similar to and different from reality?
3. Bell says 'If it's true, then it isn't new.' What do you think he means by this?
4. How and why did Martin Luther 'repaint' the church?
5. What kinds of things might make the church today similar to the church in Luther's day, or in Jesus' day?
6. How has the Anglican/Episcopal church 'repainted' the church? In the 16th Century? In the 20th Century?
7. On page 11, Bell says that the necessary work of "reforming" Christianity is done by "shedding unnecessary layers and at the same time rediscovering essentials that had been lost." Do you think "reforming" or continuing to paint and question is a necessary part of Christianity? What parts would you like to shed and what essentials do you think need to be rediscovered?
8. For Bell, reforming is not about new ways of worship, different programs or even small groups (like this one!). It is about theology. (page 12). Does "theology" appeal to you or seem intimidating or something that should be left to professionals?
9. What dangers are there in the act of 'repainting'?

***Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith* by Rob Bell**

Week 2: Jump (April 30 & May 1)

1. When Bell's wife discovers he and his son jumping way too high on the trampoline, she admonishes them to "be careful." Bell then writes "Which we were. Until she went into the house." (page 18) How is this parable lived out in your life (spiritual or otherwise) and in the church? Who do you identify with in this parable? Is this anyway to do church?
2. Bell talks a lot about truth, reality and mystery. Are these words and concepts foreign to your understanding of being a Christian? How have we personally and/or how has the church attempted to tame these words?
3. Is the point of springs to hold the trampoline mat up? And what is the point of the mat? How is jumping different from the mat or the springs? How does this metaphor work or not work for you?
4. How would you explain the metaphor of a trampoline as compared to a brick wall? Why is this distinction important?
5. Bell comments that 'Everybody has faith in something and somebody.' (020) What do you think he means by this?
6. Why is 'brickianity' associated with thinking and talking, while the trampoline is about a person's walk and their heart? How is this the same or different than your experience with the Christian faith?
7. Why do you think some Christians are afraid of questions? What can questions do for us? Why would an absence of questions be a cause for concern? What kinds of questions would be wrong to ask?
8. What does Bell mean when he says 'if we do definitively put God into words, we have at that moment made God something God is not.'? Why is the mystery of God important?
9. In his derisive discussion of "Brickworld" (pages 26-28), Bell drops in this little line from Scripture – "Depart from me for I never knew you." Matthew 25:41. How are we to understand Jesus' words in the context of tearing down the church's "brickworld"? When are communal boundaries necessary and appropriate?
10. Do you agree with Bell's assertion on page 35 that "our joy is the point? That is when God is most pleased." What are the theological and practical dangers of such an assertion? How do we find joy in God? How is joy different than happiness?
11. I love Bell's "Doubt Night" described on page 29. If you all agree, I would like everyone to bring one written doubt to each session. We will try to discuss at least a couple of them each session. They can be either attributed or anonymous.

***Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith* by Rob Bell**

Week 3: Yoke (May 7 & 8)

1. On page 42, Bell makes two statements – one right after the other! “How is it that this ancient book continues to affect me in ways no other books does?” followed immediately by “But sometimes when I hear people quote the Bible, I just want to throw up.” How does Bell reconcile these two? Does he ever answer the first question? How would you answer it?
2. According to Bell (47), interpretation isn’t the point of studying Scripture – “In the Jewish context, action was always the goal. It still is.” But how do we act if we don’t study or interpret? And who gets to say what interpretation is correct? Recall, especially in the context of this present Anglican crisis, that one of the three legs Anglican spirituality is “tradition.”
3. A yoke is defined variously as “a contrivance for joining together a pair of draft animals,” “a frame fitting the neck and shoulders of a person for carrying a pair of buckets,” “an emblem of subjection, servitude, slavery, etc.,” and “something that couples or binds together.” When you think of a “yoke” do you want to jump for joy?
4. What was Jesus' yoke, and how would you go about using it?
5. Much of this chapter is devoted to the concepts of “binding and loosing” (Matthew 18:18-20). How do you understand these concepts? How does St. Boniface live them out? To you believe God has given authority to you to bind and loose?
6. Again I say to you . . . (page 51) “If we take Jesus seriously and actually see it as our responsibility to bind and loose, the implications are endless, serious, and exhilarating.” Do you believe it is your “responsibility” to bind and loose? Are you comfortable with this responsibility? Does binding and loosing seem like an “exhilarating” prospect to you?
7. Bell acknowledges that in recognizing that everyone’s reading of the Bible rests on a set of their own or somebody else’s interpretation raises the danger of “We shouldn’t make it say what we want it to say.” (56). How do we as individuals and as a church community avoid making the Bible “say what we want it to say”? Or is that built into the binding and loosing process and we may as well just admit that everything is a construct (Derrida rules!!!).
8. While Bell understands the importance of recognizing the context of Scripture, Bell also believes that one of the reasons the Bible loses its power in many faith communities is that “They fall into the trap of thinking that the Bible is just about things that happened a long time ago” (59). Have we fallen into that trap? Have you fallen into that trap?

9. As the writer of Hebrews said, the scripture is alive and active. What do you think this means? Are these stories still happening for you?
10. "The point is to ask what is God up to here, now? What in the world is God doing today? How should we respond? How did they [the people in Scripture] respond? What can we learn from them that will help us now?" (65-66). Are we limping yet or still spectators? (68-69)

***Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith* by Rob Bell**

Week 4: True (May 14 & 15)

1. Have you ever had one of those profound moments where you were speechless with awe? Or, how about a time of tragedy where you felt in awe of God? Share a few of them.
2. Bell tells about a wedding ceremony he performed, and he goes on to say a little bit later "God is always present. We're the ones who show up" (078). What point do you think he is trying to make?
3. In Paul's quote of a Cretan prophet and in his speaking on Mars Hill he uses truth described by pagans. Bell quotes Arthur Holmes, "All truth is God's truth" (080). How might this be hard to digest for some Christians?
4. How would you answer the dilemma of the young woman Bell describes on pages 80-81? How is (or isn't) her dilemma "intellectual honesty or Jesus?"
5. "'Christian' is a great noun and a poor adjective" (084). What do you think about this statement? How might it apply to you?
6. Bell describes Paul as a "spiritual tour guide" (087). What do you think he means by this and how does it apply to you? How is this different than "taking Jesus to" someone?
7. Bell tells the story about a girl named Yvette who was in to witchcraft (089). How did this strike you? Is this anything like your story?
8. How can we recognize 'holy ground'? How do we miss it? Where is it we can find truth?

***Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith* by Rob Bell**

Week 5: Tassels (May 21 & 22)

1. Have you ever had a feeling that there was something you had to try - even if you failed - because if you didn't, it would feel 'wrong' - or that you would always wonder 'What if?'
2. Bell tells the story about the beginning of Mars Hill Bible Church, where he pastors, and some of the challenges faced in the first years of its formation, leading up to his 'escape' into a storage closet. Have you had experiences where you felt overwhelmed and ready to quit or escape from your life?
3. Bell asks 'Without pain, we don't change, do we?' (104). Can you describe a time where you had 'hit bottom' and because of the pain you experienced, you sought to change your habits or some aspect of your life? What did you do? How did it work?
4. "Shalom", a Hebrew word that translates as "peace", is more than an absence of conflict, but a holistic "completeness", a harmony with God. (107) If salvation is more than just forgiveness, but living in complete harmony with God - heart, soul, mind and body – being completely restored to Him, what does it mean to you to be "saved"?
5. What is the danger of only seeing salvation as something eternal, ignoring its temporal, earthly meaning? What is the danger of viewing salvation as fully temporal - living a 'social gospel' - but ignoring the eternal aspect of salvation?
6. Bell says that 'success doesn't fix anything' (111) and quotes the twelve-step mantra 'Wherever you go, there you are.' No matter where you are or whether you achieve the goals you've set for yourself, why do you think that location, success and achievement won't fix your problems? Or, do you think such things will 'fix' you?
7. Bell says, 'I couldn't go on. Usually, we can go on. And that's the problem.' (113) What do you think he means by this? How can the inability to 'go on' lead to our healing?
8. What is your 'superwhatever'? Do you have one? If so, have you 'killed it'? If so, how did you do this? If not, how does it currently affect you?
9. Bell talks about the need to institute Sabbath into your life. What would Sabbath look like to you? What kinds of things would you do and what kinds of things would you avoid doing for it to be a day of rest and a time of renewal?

Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith by Rob Bell

Week 6: Dust (May 28 & 29)

1. What was Jesus' religion? How would you know what his religion taught?
2. How did education fit into the Jewish culture? What textbook(s), if any, did they use? How did they know what was in their textbook? Do you think the printing press was a boon or a curse for this type of learning?
3. What is Bet Sefer? How is it different from Bet Talmud? Why were the Oral Traditions important to these students? Why were questions deemed most important to learning?
4. How is Bet Midrash different from Bet Talmud? What was a talmid, and how did someone become one? If accepted, what would a talmid do? What was meant to be 'covered in the dust of a rabbi's feet'?
5. How was Jesus different from most rabbis in selecting his talmidim? Why was this significant?
6. What lesson did Jesus teach his talmidim in Caesarea Philippi? If Jesus were physically here today, how might he give this same lesson to his talmidim?
7. If you are a talmid, you want to do everything that your rabbi does - it is your calling to be as much like your rabbi as you can be. When Peter steps out of the boat to walk on the water to Jesus, but starts to fail, Jesus says to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" Who does Peter doubt? Why?
8. "The entire rabbinical system was based on the rabbi having faith in his disciples" (134). What do you think is meant by this? How is this counter to some of modern Christian teaching?

***Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith* by Rob Bell**

Week 7: New (June 4 & 5)

1. Have you ever used the excuse "I'm just a sinner"? When, if ever, have you felt like you had to keep doing more and more and more for God to be happy with you?
2. When you become a Christian, how is it that your identity changes? Is this change a present one, a future one, or both? Why?
3. When does "eternal life" start? How might this challenge you to live differently if you had only thought of "eternal life" as something out in the future?
4. What should a Christian's response be to sin in their lives? What lesson can we learn about this from the younger son in the Jesus' parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-31)? What about the older son?
5. When Christ replaced us with his death on the cross, our sins were forgiven. Bell writes, "Heaven is full of forgiven people. Hell is full of forgiven people." What do you think he means by this?
6. Bell writes about two realms; a realm of heaven which is living in sync with God's desires and a realm of hell which is absent of what God desires. He speaks of this as both a present reality and as a future destination. How might your view of these two realms - present, future or both - impact the way you live your life?
7. The concept of *t'shuva* - sometimes translated as repentance - is a concept which is a picture of a man walking in a direction away from God, stopping, turning around, and walking back in the same direction with God. How do we experience true repentance in this "return" to God?
8. Bell tells a story of eating at a diner in Grand Rapids as an example of grace. Can you think of any similar examples in your life? How is this like the grace we receive from God?

***Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith* by Rob Bell**

Week 8: Good (June 11 &12)

1. In Genesis, God first created something, and then those things He created (land, sky, birds, trees, etc.) are shown as producing new things of their own. All of these things He created, God called "good" - not perfect or complete - "good". What does He expect of us, in terms of responsibility and stewardship? How did the choices of Adam and Eve derail this plan? Is it God's intention that His creation will always remain fractured?
2. Bell notes several ways in which the church became counter-cultural in the years after Jesus' death and resurrection. The declaration that "Jesus is Lord" was in direct conflict with the Roman slogan "Caesar is Lord", and Christians called their communities *ekklesias* (churches) which was the same word Romans used to describe cities which accepted Caesar as Lord. Without violence, they were able to transform their culture. What similar challenges do we face today? How are these similar or different than the ones faced by early Christians?
3. Who is Lord in our world? Who orders our society? Who provides for us, and for the poor? Who brings peace to the world? Is it Jesus, or have we let someone or something take his place? Where is the church in all of this? Where are we in all of this?
4. What is the purpose of the church? Why did God bless Abraham? Why does God bless the church? In turn, who is it the church is supposed to bless?
5. Who does Jesus say is the greatest in the kingdom? What traps do some churches fall into when they miss this? What does Bell mean when he says "Why blame the dark for being dark? It is far more helpful to ask why the light isn't as bright as it could be." (166)
6. Bell states "If the gospel isn't good news for everybody, then it isn't good news for anybody." (167) How can the gospel be good news to people who do not accept its message?
7. Jesus commanded us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Who are our neighbors and how do we love them? How do we make that love unconditional? Bell states "Oftentimes the Christian community has sent the message that we love people and build relationships in order to convert them to the Christian faith. So there is an agenda. And when there is an agenda, it really isn't love, is it? ...**I** We have to surrender our agendas." (167) What does he mean by this, and why is this difficult for us? Where does faith come in?

8. Jesus' call isn't one to make our lives easier, and, chances are, following him may lead us into suffering. How is this to our advantage?
9. Bell comments that "as Christians, it is our duty to master the art of the long meal". (171) What do you think he means by this? How can this help us in our walk and in our witness?
10. In multiple places in the Bible, the God's people and/or the church are compared to a bride. Rich Mullins once commented that "What I think is scary about God is that He didn't come up with any 'Plan B'; that He left the church here, and the church is the only institution in the world that can bring about a change." What do you find inspiring and/or scary about the church? What did Jesus say about her?

SMALL GROUP CALENDAR

DATE	Discussion Co- Facilitators	Prayer Facilitator	Refreshments	Member Follow-up
Week 1: Introduction (April 23 & 24)				
Week 2: Jump (April 30 & May 1)				
Week 3: Yoke (May 7 & 8)				
Week 4: True (May 14 & 15)				
Week 5: Tassels (May 21 & 22)				
Week 6: Dust (May 28 & 29)				
Week 7: New (June 4 & 5)				
Week 8: Good (June 11 & 12)				

