

The 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Hosea 11:1-11; Psalm 107:1-9, 43; Luke 12:13-21; Colossians 3:1-11

Hosea 11:1-11 is one of the tenderest and poignant passages in scripture, rivaling even the story of the Prodigal Son. In this passage, one sees the father/mother heart of God displayed, a God who loves God's people to the greatest depths. The passage begins with a historical recitation of Israel's deliverance from Egyptian domination and slavery, but it is written from God's standpoint, not from the author's. "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Ba'als and offering incense to idols" (11:1-2).

These opening words state the issue squarely. God loved Israel and made it possible for them to throw off Egyptian bondage and to escape from the oppression and exploitation of the most powerful system and people of the day.

But what did Israel do with the liberation that God had brought them because of that love? They "kept sacrificing to the Ba'als and offering incense to idols", preferring a society built upon the values of control, oppression and exploitation. Thus, it was much easier to take Israel out of Egypt than it was to take Egypt out of the Israelites, for in a new Promised Land where they had the opportunity to build a society of justice, equity and relationality, they gravitated toward the Egyptian lifestyle of exploitation symbolized by Ba'al worship.

"Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk; I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them" (vss. 3-4). When one reads these words, one can't help but feel God's incredulity about Israel's obvious preference for a dominating and oppressive society rather than the loving world offered by God. And one can't help but realize, "God is hurt! God's feelings are hurt! His love has been clearly rejected by Israel, and God is both mystified and hurt!"

Out of that pain of rejection, God lashes out in anger. "They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me. The sword rages in their cities; it consumes their oracle-priests, and devours because of their schemes" (vss. 5-6). Do they prefer the domination of pharaoh in Egypt to the liberating love of Yahweh? Well, let them have Egypt! Let them experience the inevitable result of such love of domination by experiencing the full wrath of Assyria. Let them be conquered by the most dominating nation that has ever existed – Assyria – and then let's see how much they like it!

But God can't do that to the people he loves and has chosen! "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over (to Assyria), O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboim?"¹ My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender" (vs. 8).

¹ Admah and Zeboim were two of the cities destroyed in the mass destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (cf. Gen. 10:19; 14:2; Deut. 29:23; Gen. 19:24-28, Jer. 49:18).

Then God, grieved over Israel's rejection of God and embrace of the dominating culture of Egypt, the Ba'als and Assyria, and distressed over God's need to act justly and to require of Israel either repentance or annihilation, makes his decision. "I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath" (v. 9).

God's very nature, Hosea proclaims in this prophecy, is that of love and compassion. God doesn't want revenge upon Israel; what God longs for is Israel's salvation. Mercy and justice are the twin characteristics of God's personality, but it will be mercy (i.e., grace) that God will ultimately exercise for Israel's salvation. For these people – as sinful, as seduced by the powers of domination, exploitation and oppression as they are, as hungry for wealth and power and prestige as they may be, are still God's chosen people, and God will not – can not – reject them!

So Hosea concludes, "They shall go after the Lord, who roars like a lion; when he roars, his children shall come trembling from the west. They shall come trembling like birds from Egypt, and like doves from the land of Assyria; and I will return them to their homes, says the Lord" (vv. 10-11).

Israel has sinned deeply in preferring Ba'al to Yahweh, a politics of unilateral power leading to oppression of the weak rather than a politics of justice, an economics of greed leading to exploitation of the vulnerable rather than an economics of equitable sharing. They have preferred the power and seduction of Egypt and Assyria (the two most powerful nations of Hosea's day) to being in covenant with God. So God will have to punish those whom he loves. But this will not be a punishment of annihilation, but a punishment of purging. Out of Egypt God will call his children. Out of exile in Assyria, God will call his people. When sufficient purging and repentance has taken place so that Israel will have come to itself, then God will call them to him as a lioness calls her pride of cubs. And they will come trembling – trembling from their allegiance to Egypt, their exile in Assyria, and God will return them back home to Israel where they will live in that society that God has created to be the world as God intends it to be.

That was Hosea's dream for prostitute Israel, a dream based upon his recognition of the profound love of God. It was out of this dream that Hosea was able to compose one of the richest statements about God's love found in the scriptures, a statement that captures all the emotion, the pathos, the punishment God receives from an unrepentant Israel. For in that prophecy, we see the pain and torture God goes through at the perfidy and unfaithfulness of God's own people. For our God is not one who sits implacably in the heavens but one who stoops to the conditions of humanity, and suffers along with them as God desperately yearns for their repentance and willingness to embrace the world God so deeply wants for them.

Psalm 107:1-9, 43 demonstrates the *chesedh* love of God toward those who love him, particularly when they are in trouble. It begins:

"O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good for his steadfast love (*chesedh*) endures forever. Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, those he redeemed from trouble and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and south" (107:1-3).

The Psalmist then demonstrates this steadfast and gracious love of God for his people by giving four examples. He does so by holding each of the four groups to the same poetic structure, copying two refrains identically, but also developing new content for each group. The four groups are desert wanderers, people experiencing great pain and darkness (either spiritually or emotionally), the physically ill, and those on the abyss of the ocean.

The form followed in each segment is identical. It begins with the word “some” and then a naming of the problem area (“Some wandered in desert wastes”, “Some went down to the sea in ships”, etc.). The problem that each group faces is then briefly analyzed. Then the segment changes its focus with an introduction of identical words – “Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress”, followed by a more full explanation of that deliverance. Finally, the segment resolves itself by concluding “Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works for humankind”.

So the order of all four segments is: (1) a problem overwhelming the people of Israel is stated; (2) They recognize their inability to cope with this problem by themselves, and so turn to God in their distress; (3) God hears them and rescues them from their distress.

The selection from this Psalm for today about a troubled group, vss. 4-9, deals with those who “wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to an inhabited town” (vs. 4). Of course, in a semi-arid area like ancient Israel, the fear of getting lost in the desert was a genuine fear and a continuing threat, for any trip through the wilderness faced potential disaster. In this segment, the writer is dealing with refugees, wanderers upon the earth. These are the “strangers”, the “alien”, the “foreigners” so often referred to in the scripture. And most often, the instruction to the Israelites was to “love the stranger, for you were once strangers in Egypt” (Deut. 10:19). In this passage, the Psalmist demonstrates how God cares for the alien and the marginalized, for when “they cried to the Lord in their trouble, he delivered them from their distress and led them by a straight way until they reached an inhabited town” (vss. 6-7). Thus, the Psalmist instructs such people to “thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for he satisfies the thirsty, and the hungry he fills with good things” (vss. 8-9).

The Psalmist then ends this hymn with the instruction, “Let those who are wise give heed to these things, and consider the steadfast love (*chesedh*) of the Lord” (vs. 43)!

Luke 12:13-21 deals with the power of money to corrupt. In it, Jesus points out that the very forces that corrupt the systems and seduce them from their true calling of justice, equity and relationship with God are the very same forces that can corrupt and divert the follower of Jesus. And chief among these is greed!

Someone in the crowd gathered around Jesus requests of him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” But rather than arbitrate the dispute (a standard role of a rabbi in Jesus’ time – so such a request was not inappropriate), Jesus replied, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” In other words, Jesus was saying, “Why should I assume the responsibility of arbitrating the division of property between your brother and you? You are

allowing your greed to get in the way of the relationship you are meant by God to have with your brother. I won't contribute to the destruction of that relationship by arbitrating your claim."

Then Jesus gets right to the point. "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" (vs. 15).

For the follower of Jesus to succumb to the lure of possessions or wealth is to yield to that temptation most used by Satan to capture and control both the systems and people, Luke warns us through this passage. For the Christian to yield to the allure of money is to make himself no different than the systems he is called by God to hold accountable. And once he has been so seduced, he cannot be of significant service to God's kingdom – for he has compromised himself!

Jesus then drives the point home by telling the parable of the rich fool who lives his whole life to accumulate wealth, only to have God say to him, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" Then Jesus concludes, "So it is with those who store up treasure for themselves but are not rich toward God" (vss. 20-21).

The earlier part of Luke 12 deals with the "hypocrisy" (12:1) of the religious leaders who say they are following God but are in reality seeking to build power, position and wealth for themselves. But the Hebrew word for "hypocrisy" is less that of its English meaning as an appearance of virtue or religion, and more that of "play acting" – of "living lives not determined by God" (e.g., Job. 34:30; Gal. 6:13; II Macc. 6:21-25; IV Macc. 6:15-23). The basic message Jesus was presenting in 12:1-12 was that the failure of the Pharisees and Israel's religious/political leaders was to accurately discern the purposes of God for Israel and the world, because they were so caught up in protecting their power and privilege. That, in turn, led them to a failure in truly perceiving and embracing the message of scripture (i.e., the Old Testament), and thus resulting in their inability to live lives truly centered in the love of God and neighbor. Therefore, they were "play-actors" in regards to religion, following its forms and conventions but not embracing and living out its dynamic compassion and commitment to the world.

The greatest danger for the followers of Jesus, the Master develops in today's Gospel Lesson, is that they can become "play-actors" too. They can end up mouthing words about loving God, Jesus and their neighbor, but be every bit as "hypocritical" as Israel's religious and political leaders. And there is no part of life in which hypocrisy has its highest potential than with money. The potential and threat of the coming of the kingdom of God upon the earth has significant implications for our convictions and actions regarding the possessions of Jesus' followers. The very way we deal with our money will expose what we really believe about God and God's intentions for the world (as opposed to what we say we believe). No matter how much we proclaim our allegiance to Christ and his kingdom, if we operate out of the commitment of "storing up treasures for ourselves" (whether those treasures are possessions, prestige, parochialism or power), then we will not be "rich toward God" and will find ourselves, like the rich fool, hearing the verdict, "This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"

Colossians 3:1-11 begins a section dealing with how Christians are to act in the light of the work God has done through Christ in enabling human society to function as God intended. God intends all creation, whether “in heaven or on earth” to be centered in Christ. The political, economic and values-creating (religious) systems of all human society (including Rome) are to be centered on being just and fair to all, equitably sharing wealth, eliminating poverty, and living as relational cultures, centered in the worship of God and God’s son, Jesus Christ (1:3-23). Such a way of life is to be followed, not just by the systems and their leaders of society, but by all humanity – and especially the Christians (2:1-19). But now, in today’s epistle lesson, Paul becomes extremely specific in his expectations for the Christian community.

“If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God” (3:1). The Colossian Christians are to live their earthly life as if they were already in heaven, Paul instructs them. In other words, they have “died” and are “hidden” (the Greek word translated “hidden” doesn’t so much have the sense of something secreted away as it does that of being buried) or “buried” to this world and its priorities of unilateral power, greed and domination, and are now “revealed in glory” with Christ. Their act of embracing Christ as savior and lord has caused them to embrace God’s intentions for the world (justice, sharing, relationality – or, in other words, “shalom”). Thus, they are now “dead” to the priorities of Rome or of the Jewish Religious Aristocracy, and alive to Christ’s priorities.

Since they are “dead” to the priorities of political, economic and religious society, Paul continues, they need to begin acting like they are dead to the allure and domination of those systems. And that means changing the way they live, avoiding “fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, greed, anger, wrath, malice, slander, abusive language and lying” (vv. 5-9). There are eleven sins Paul states that the Corinthian Christians, as those “alive in Christ”, must avoid. He lists sexual sins (the first four), one economic sin (“greed”), and six social/political sins. The Corinthian Christians are to express in their actions what they confess through their words – that they have put aside one way of life and taken on another way (vv. 9-10). They are now the “icon” of God (the literal meaning of the Greek word translated “image”); so they need to act like it!

By becoming the “icon” of God, Paul concludes, all the old ways of understanding one’s uniqueness in society is gone. One can no longer use race, ethnicity, nationality, social class, economic status or political loyalty to define one’s self. All those ways of defining humanity are invalid – ways that have been used for eons by the political, economic and religious authorities to decide who is “in” and who is “out” in order to control. All such domination has been done away with, through the redemptive act of Jesus Christ. Who we are is not determined by these standards, for all who have been embraced by Jesus Christ and embrace him in return are all one people – a new people who are to live their corporate, individual, social, political, economic and spiritual lives united in Christ.

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