

25 July, 2010; Proper 12C  
Hos 1:2-10; Ps 85  
Col 2:16-25; Luke 11:1-13

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I know we're not supposed to have favorite relatives, but my grandmother Sheba was far and away my favorite grandparent. My other grandparents were kind of stodgy, but she was tall and graceful, with flaming red hair and flamboyant clothing and jewelry. The others wanted me to feed ducks (which I loved) or sit quietly while they talked to grown-ups; Sheba was up for anything. In the summers, she would come berry-picking with me or join me in hopping from one boulder to another to cross streams. Together, we would challenge received wisdom, explore new places, try exotic foods, canoe, skin freshly-caught fish, and play silly games. Sheba was a rule-breaker par excellence, and she broke every rule -- including the Most Sacred Rule of Parenting. At least once in every visit, she would pull me close and whisper in my ear, "You are first in my heart." Maybe she thought that, as the child of an early divorce, I needed to hear that. Probably, I did. However often my family moved, whatever was happening with my parents, I knew that I came first for someone.

We all need to know that we come first for someone. Or, at least, that we matter a whole lot.

Perhaps that's why today's reading from Hosea provides such a terrifying glimpse into divine reality. "Take yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom," the Lord instructs the prophet, who is, no doubt, stunned. What God means is this: *Hosea, Go and found your most intimate relationships on betrayal and on unfaithfulness. Take away the protections around your heart, the peace you want in your home. Subject yourself to a diet of quarrels and recriminations, for that is what I, the Lord, have received from the hands of your people.*

And it gets worse, for, as each of Hosea's three children are born, God gives them names which erase their relationship: "Jezreel," meaning "God Sows," which was also the Hebrew fortress where King Ahab's idolatrous wife Jezebel was flung to her death to be eaten by dogs; "Lo-ruhamah," meaning, "Not Pitied," and "Lo-ammi," meaning "Not my People." Most children are signs of hope and of promise for those who see them; these children are made to be pledges of disaster. The divine word which spoke them into being speaks them into isolation and fragmentation: the isolation and fragmentation we impose on God.

These names go to the heart of our deepest fears. They speak of being judged and condemned, of being desperate and finding no mercy, of being alone and finding no friend or kindred or kindly hand. They speak, in other words, all too eloquently of the ways we often treat one another. For the undocumented people of New Brunswick, who are being rounded up in raid after raid, mercy and forgiveness are not things they expect to receive. For the unemployed facing a market with five applicants for every job, for the elderly alone in their apartments, for the addict who begs for money and watches people walk on by, for the abused spouse or the single parent struggling to raise three children on a limited income, this world is their own.

The poet W. H. Auden describes this place when he writes:

A ragged urchin, aimless and alone,  
Loitered about that vacancy; a bird  
Flew up to safety from his well-aimed stone:  
That girls are raped, that two boys knife a third,  
Were axioms to him, who'd never heard  
Of any world where promises were kept,  
Or one could weep because another wept.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "The Shield of Achilles"

These are people who have been judged and condemned, all without a hearing. The question is not whether they are innocent; some are, some are not. The question is how we treat one another: whether we who live by the mercy of God, we who hope to receive mercy daily from those we love, have the right to live among others from a frozen heart. God names these children as we too often name one another.

And yet, we who do these things are people who try to lead *good* lives! We do not set out to be mean, to be cruel, to harm others. We raise and educate our children; try to eat healthy foods; attend church; decorate for Christmas; put up with annoying relatives and difficult co-workers; we even volunteer our time for the causes we believe in, hoping to make a better world. The great moral question is not “Where does evil come from?”, but, rather, “How can so many good people live in a free society in which, nevertheless, so much is chronically wrong?”

We ask ourselves small versions of this question each week: How can we be involved in wars which so few support? How can our public education system fail so many children when we all know that education is the gateway to opportunity? How can we continue to plunder the environment when we all see the effects of its degradation around us? How can we incur so much national debt when we know that we are mortgaging our children’s future? Where have our choices gone? Why do the wicked prosper? And why are they so damnably hard to get rid of?

Perhaps because we mistake the lesser goods we choose with the One Necessary Good.

The author of Colossians reminds us that, in much of our lives, the choices we face are NOT choices between good and evil, but choices between things which humans define as good and the path of God. “Do not let anyone condemn you,” Paul writes, “in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.” (Col 2: 16-17) There is nothing wrong with eating or drinking, with observing the Sabbath on one day or another, with preferring one kind of celebration above another. These are good things, in and of themselves, *but they are not at the center of the heart of Christ*. They are mere shadows, “human commands and teachings,” insubstantial except in how they teach us to hear or not to hear the Word of God. (Col 2:22)

So much of what we define as “good” in our culture falls into the same category! The various forms of exercise and recreation, professional advancement, comfortable homes -- all these are lovely things, but they cannot bear the weight of our full trust. Even the things we define as spiritual: yoga and tai chi, vegetarianism, eating locally-grown food, reading spiritual books, praying the Anglican rosary -- all of them things which really *are* spiritual and really *do* enrich the heart -- these are optional practices, not core teachings, akin to the feasts and fasts of Colossae. Paul reminds us, “These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence.” (Col 2:23)

Anglican moral teaching has long relied upon three basic categories for our action and our inaction: things which are commanded in Scripture, and which must be done; things which are prohibited in Scripture, and which must be avoided; and things which are morally indifferent, and which each of us is free to do or not to do according to our personal taste and the individual bent of our spirit. Most of our lives fall into that last category: what we wear, what we drive, what we eat, where we work, whom and whether we marry, and so on -- although, if you think about it, there are better and worse choices for each of those things. Even much of our religious practice is a matter of preference; here at Christ Church, we have candles on our altars and sing much of the service, but there are other churches which do not use candles and which speak the service, and their prayers are as holy as ours. The key thing is not to confuse the trimmings with what matters: the ability of our soul to love and our willingness to live accordingly.

That's why Paul comes back at the end to necessity of "checking self-indulgence," for the core teaching of Christ is to love God and to love others as we love ourselves. To do that is *kenosis*, self-emptying. To do anything else is self-inflating, self-indulgence. We are not all called to climb upon a cross, but we are called to look upon Christ's cross and to see there the plain and unadorned image of divine love. There is nothing of "self" in being willing to die for others who walk past one's sacrifice indifferent.

Christian faith and Christian practice are a matter of unlearning those hateful names: not pitied, not my people. We do not see it in today's reading, but only a chapter later, God relents and says, "I will have pity on Lo-ruhamah, and I will say to Lo-ammi, 'You are my people.'" (Hos 2: 23) Like God, we must learn to claim relationship where at first we saw none, to have pity where it seemed that no mercy was called for. God does not have mercy on us because we are worth it, but because it is the nature of God to have mercy.

John Claypool used to tell a story about an old man who was walking one day by a stream. As he went, he marveled at the beauty of the vegetation around it, the murmur of the waters, the light reflecting in the eddies. Then he noticed that there was a branch stuck on the rocks, and a scorpion on the branch. If the branch broke free, the scorpion would drown. And so the man waded out into the stream and spoke to the scorpion: "I will rescue me if you will promise not to sting me." And the scorpion agreed. So the man picked up the scorpion on the branch and moved to carry him to safety, but the scorpion raised its tail and stung the man in his hand. And the man said to him, "Why have you done this thing? For now I will die, and you will drown." The scorpion replied, "It is my nature to sting. Did you not know that? Why then did you try to help me?" "I knew it," the old man replied. "But it is *my* nature to love."

*We* may give one another scorpions in place of eggs, but God will not. It is not in God's nature to harm, and God has promised us that, by, the gift of the Holy Spirit, he will transform our hearts as his. But the path of transformation is the path of God's choosing, not ours.

There are few more powerful tools for the re-education of our hearts than the prayer which Jesus taught us. Everything in it leads us away from self and into the love of God. "Father," we pray, admitting that we are not worlds unto our selves. We have a creator, and we are creatures, and there is a relationship between us. "Our Father," we pray most often, reminding ourselves that we share our identity with every man, woman, and child on this earth. "Hallowed by your name." Not our name! God's name. We pray for the honoring of another, for reverence and awe, virtues which are all about acknowledging the limits of our self.

"Your kingdom come," we ask, implying that it is God, and not ourselves, who sets the rules and governs the world. "Give us each day our daily bread," a petition that is modest and humble, cutting against self-aggrandizement. We do not ask for secure futures, comfortable retirements, or palaces to live in, but for enough to get through the day. "And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us." We acknowledge our own imperfections, practice humility in asking to be forgiven and to have the relationship restored, and admit that we, too, need to forgive with a generous heart if we wish to receive mercy.

Finally, "Do not bring us to the time of trial." This is a prayer which acknowledges our frailty. Too often, in our culture, we claim and act as if we can overcome anything. Sometimes, we can, and that is a thing of glory. But for each of us, there are tests which will break us in spirit or in soul, and, in praying to God, we pray not to be tested beyond our measure. We ask for grace to go forward, one day and one crumb of bread at a time, in this journey from cradle to cross to freedom which we all walk, side-by-side.

William Sloan Coffin writes, "I never get over the huge gift and the huge demands of Christianity, the gift of God's love and the demands of human possibility. Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been tried and found difficult, and watered down again and again."<sup>2</sup> But even as we keep pouring in the water of our fear, of our mortality, of our self, so God keeps mixing the chalice, pouring in the strong and glorious wine of his divine spirit, poured out for us, poured in to us, every day of our lives. So ask, for it has been given. Knock, for the door has already been opened. Search, for you have been found. Not the you which you must leave at the door like excess baggage, but the you whose name was inscribed on the palms of God before time began, and ever shall be, world without end. (Is 49:16) Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> *Letters to a Young Doubter*, p. 96-7.