

THE NINTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST – PROPER 12

July 25, 2010 C

I want to acknowledge “Magdalene’s Musings – Accidental and incidental reflections on scripture, church, women, parenthood, music, art, and other things that haven’t occurred to me yet, but about which I’m sure I have opinions” which I happened to find on the internet while searching for some insights on the Book of the Prophet Hosea. Her reflection on 7-5-07 entitled, “The Compassion of God: A Sermon on Hosea 11:1-11” is where I found the energizing image of looking at Hosea 11 through the ‘lens’ of a parent ‘flipping the pages of a photo album...recalling the ways in which they have cared for the child from earliest times,’ and seeing Israel in the 8th century B.C.E. from the perspective of a ‘rebellious teenager.’ Her insights led me to take a more ‘panoramic view’ of Hosea, combining today’s first lesson with next week’s (Hosea 11:1-11).

Hosea 1:2-10

When I first looked at today’s scripture readings several weeks ago and saw that today’s gospel was Luke’s version of Jesus teaching the disciples how to pray (Luke 11:1-13), I thought to myself, “Wonderful, I’m going to talk about prayer” – and I started reading again a book on the Lord’s Prayer I read years ago, to start preparing for this morning. The book is called, *Lord, Teach Us*, by William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas.

But I couldn’t stop thinking about Hosea and kept returning to our first lesson, even reading ahead to next Sunday, since we have two Sundays in a row of lessons from the Book of the Prophet Hosea. The more reading I did on his life and message, his theology and the historical context of the eighth century B.C.E. when he lived, the more I felt something stirring in me to preach today about Hosea! So let me start with Hosea and his wife Gomer, by imagining, three thousands years after they lived, what it would be like for instance, if Gomer was a guest on the Oprah Winfrey Show; and if Hosea was a guest, let’s say, of Larry King Live! First, Oprah: “Gomer, what was it like for you to be sleeping with so many different men, knowing that your husband, Hosea, was aware of your promiscuous behavior and was always ready and willing to welcome you back home? Do you think he really loved you or did he sort of feel obligated to stay in the relationship, staying faithful to the marriage covenant even if you were consistently unfaithful?” Now, Larry: “Hosea, what was it like for you to have three children with your wife Gomer, knowing that there had to be some lingering doubts in your mind, given your spouse’s reputation, as to whether or not they were indeed your children or someone else’s? Looking back, don’t you wish there were DNA tests in your day, or did it not matter to you? And is it true that when Gomer left you and fell into abject poverty, about to be sold as a slave in the town square, that you, the most widely acclaimed prophet in all of Israel at the time – you surprised everyone and stepped forth and literally paid the price to get her back? You were not just the talk of the town, you were the talk of the nation! Surely, everyone must have thought it was a waste of your time, your effort and your money, not to mention your credibility as a prophet of Yahweh. Did you really love Gomer that much that you were willing to put up with so much garbage?

That’s basically the Biblical story of Hosea and Gomer’s relationship!! It’s like a parable, a story meant to get people’s attention. I suspect then, as now, among things that get our attention and make the daily news are stories of marital infidelity among the rich and the famous. In this case, the story of Hosea and Gomer’s marriage is a metaphor of the covenant God and the people of Israel made

with one another through Moses on Mt. Sinai. Hosea lived the metaphor. Gomer's infidelity represents Israel's unfaithfulness, for the people had abandoned God and the covenant relationship was severely ruptured, broken through their practice of idolatry. The prophet Hosea spends much time in his many oracles or messages of God given through him, trying to persuade the people of Israel to reform their ways, to return to God. I've never associated the saying of St. Francis of Assisi, "Preach and when necessary use words" with Hosea. However, it takes on new meaning when we look at Hosea's marriage, but it's not the only metaphor we find in his writings.

Let's fast forward now to next Sunday where we will find another metaphor in Hosea worth our reflection today. It's the metaphor of God as a parent. Chapter Eleven, the lesson for next week, is a radical shift in mood and content from what we encounter in today's reading. God is a parent reflecting on God's relationship with Israel - and the image of looking at a family photo album is a good point of reference for us to grasp the significance of what Hosea is trying to communicate. God is going through the pictures in a family album, remembering the past. 'I loved my child. I took my child in my arms and held my child to my cheeks. I fed my child as an infant. Look! There's a picture of me helping my child to walk. I can see my footprints in the sand!'

"But dag gummit (I never heard of this word before I came to Greenville and eastern Carolina, and I think I'm using it in the right context!!) Dag gummit! My kid is now a rebellious teenager, using and selling drugs, running with the wrong crowd, getting into destructive patterns of behavior - and I'm mad as hell and tempted to use some severe punishment, but I'm not going to let my anger get the best of me. My heart won't let me do it. My compassion and mercy for my people is so strong I would rather suffer myself and continue to faithfully love them, even if they don't heed my warnings - AND even if they will end up suffering themselves the natural consequences of the choices they have made. I can't protect them from what's going to happen to them because of their choices. And it breaks my heart. But I will wait patiently for them to return home to me."

That's the God revealed to us in the Old Testament Book of the Prophet Hosea. Metaphors of an unfaithful spouse and of a rebellious teenager are meant to highlight the truth of who God is. "I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath" (11:9). It's one of the most tender expressions of God's love and faithfulness we find in all of the Old Testament. (We'll hear it next Sunday.)

What the Book of the Prophet Hosea clearly proclaims is that God does not will human suffering. God does not cause human suffering, whether it be an idolatrous people in the 8th Century B.C.E. or an adulterous spouse or a rebellious teenager or even a nation pre-occupied with the state of the economy while paying little attention to its spiritual bankruptcy. The idea of punishing people, even people whose behavior and idolatrous ways angers and grieves God is not what God is about. God does not seek revenge but rather offers mercy and compassion and a patient call to repentance and conversion.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, this is the essence of Hosea writings - a prophetic book which probably influenced Jesus to tell parables - parables like the story of the Loving Parent, patiently waiting for his prodigal child to return home as we know so well from this story in Luke's gospel. The tag line in Hosea is a call to conversion, to repent, to 'come home.' The tag line in the Loving Parent parable is reconciliation - something which couldn't begin until the prodigal humbled himself to admit the hurt he had caused and takes responsibility for what he had done. Reconciliation also

requires that the older child makes room in his own heart for his brother to come home. It's not just about the parent and rebellious child...

Reconciliation is only possible because the parent's loving, generous spirit enables her to let go of her anger and hurt to welcome the prodigal home. Thus begins the hard work of returning trust, of rebuilding the broken relationship, of repairing the damage that has been done.

It's why, perhaps, when Jesus' disciples asked him to teach them to pray, he gave them and us much more than a formula of words, but a proper attitude of seeking God's will in all things, thanking God for what God has given us and, above all else, treasuring love and forgiveness, mercy and reconciliation, so we in turn can generously offer these gifts to others.

"If we, then, know how to give good gifts to our children, how much more will our heavenly parent give the Holy Spirit to those who ask" (Luke 11:13).

Amen.

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