

Pentecost 10, Year C  
August 1, 2010  
Hosea 11:1-11  
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Ever since Marcion in the second century some Christians have nurtured the belief that the God of the Old Testament is mean and nasty while the God of the New Testament is kind and loving. This view has remained popular in spite of the fact that neither of these conclusions can withstand any real scrutiny. Sometimes the New Testament describes God as kind and loving, and sometimes the New Testament describes God as mean and nasty, even genocidal. Sometimes the Old Testament describes God as kind and loving, and sometimes the Old Testament describes God as mean and nasty, even genocidal. The truth that emerges from a careful study of the way God is depicted in scripture is that the Bible contains many different characterizations of God, not all of which are fully compatible with each other. This fact does not excuse us from the task of struggling to come to grips with our own best understanding of how God works in this world, but it does free us from the burden of imagining that our spiritual imagination is normative, our views not merely correct, but exhaustive.

It is in the spirit of this important task that I ask us all to consider very carefully this week's Old Testament lesson from the prophet Hosea. Note first

that it is among the many passages that utterly refutes, (or is that refudiates?) the notion that the God of the Old Testament is always and only violent and destructive. What we have here is a lament, but not one offered by a duly chastised human hoping that God will once again turn and forgive the people, but rather it is a lament from God, grieving over this faithless people. Though God loves the people of Israel, God still grieves because: “the more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols.” God nevertheless led them with “the cords of kindness, with bands of love,” and fed these people who would not follow. Though God is justly angry; “my heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim...I will not come in wrath”

What we see in this passage is the love of God not eliminating anger, which is real and present, but more profoundly the love of God overcoming the natural urge to act destructively on the basis of that anger. As a result we see God forgiving and seeking these people before ever they acknowledge their faithlessness. This is an important point; the love of God abides, it does not depend upon what people do. Because of that the forgiveness of God is prior to repentance. This draws attention to the second important point in this passage, the subtle, but profound sense of conversion we see. “I will not *again* destroy Ephraim” says God. God has acted violently toward the people in the

past, and that violence has not worked; indeed, that violence has hurt God, whose “heart recoils within me.” In this passage we see the renunciation of violence on the part of God, whose judgment now is executed through compassion and mercy, not death and destruction.

Note next how anger figures into this passage. God is angry; there is no sense in this passage that the sins of the people do not matter to God. On the contrary, they matter a lot for they have destroyed the relationship between the creator and those God has created as the people have abandoned the covenant, and gone after other gods. But that holy and righteous and entirely justified anger does not control God’s response to these people. What God wants is a redeemed people, not a vindication of the divine ego; God’s goal is that these faithless people come back, and so destructive punishment gives way to divine resolve to “return them to their homes.” Anger is real in this passage, but it is not in charge of the moment.. Love also is real; it provides the prevailing motivation.

So note finally how destructive violence does enter into the picture here. Listen to the way ruin comes upon the people. Because of their sinfulness the people “shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king.” “The sword rages in their cities, it consumes their oracle-priests, and devours because of their schemes.” That is crucial. The people are subjected to violence not because God has punished them, but because they are now forced

to live out the results of their own actions. What we have is not an angry deity exacting revenge, what we have here is God in pain watching the beloved people ruin themselves because of their own actions.

Earlier portions of this book make that even more clear. “They sow the wind” we read in chapter eight, “and they shall reap the whirlwind.” This happens not because God sends them a whirlwind, but because whirlwinds are what come to people who act this way. In chapter ten we read “you have plowed wickedness, you have reaped injustice, you have eaten the fruit of lies.” And also, “Because you have trusted in your power and in the multitude of your warriors, therefore the tumult of war shall rise against your people.” See what is happening here. The people suffer not because God visits punishment on them; that notion is explicitly rejected throughout the whole book. They suffer because they must live with the results of their own folly. And all the while God waits and hopes, and prays as it were, for these faithless people to get over their madness and return to the God who loves them. You will not find in scripture a more poignant description of the anguished predicament we have created for God than these words we heard today. It is not an abandoned and desolate humanity that sits and waits and hopes for God once again to shower us with divine love. It is an abandoned and desolate God who sits and waits and hopes that we will once again embrace that divine love and walk once more in its light.

Of all the images in the Bible of God in relationship to people this one strikes me as the most compelling, the most true. We don't have wars because God chooses periodically to use one set of people to exercise divine wrath on another set of people. We have wars because we are terrified of each other, and act out of that fear rather than out of the divine love that everywhere surrounds us. And no one knows how to create a world in which we can live together free of that mutual fear and resultant distrust. We don't have grinding poverty in this world because God favors one group of people over another, we have grinding poverty in this world because collectively we accept and even embrace systems of wealth generation and distribution that lift some people up and push some people down, and we collectively are entirely unable to create any other way of living, having failed miserably and justifiably at every attempt thus far essayed.

We could compound the examples, but I don't think that is necessary in order to see how Hosea's metaphor speaks to us today. Contrary to the prevailing theological imagery both then and now, the human predicament in relationship to God is not expressed in terms of what we need to do to find forgiveness and new life in the presence of God. The human predicament, on the contrary, is how do we even become aware of our own faithlessness, and so create the possibility of turning back to the God who ceaselessly seeks us, who wishes for nothing more than to bring us home? It makes sense to us to trust

in our own capacity to build ever greater armies, and it feels insane to us to throw down the weapons of war. It makes sense to us to construct economic systems that, in the name of the free market destroy competition, and exploit labor. It seems crazy and unworkable to do anything else. And from the human point of view we are right. From a human point of view it is crazy to disarm, and it is crazy to try and build an economy on anything other than productivity; every effort to do so has failed. We collectively, we as humans, are therefore stuck with the results of our own vision of sanity, and today Hosea tells us that this reality is really hard on God, whose love for us would lead us in a different direction, if we but would.

I know that the first rule of preaching is to leave the congregation with some message of hope, some word of encouragement, and to this point I have none. I believe Hosea's image speaks the truth about us, not just then, but now, and so I believe I am insane, completely crazy when it comes to my relationship with God. I don't get it, and I don't know many people who do. So my word of hope is this, that we can all sit with this prophet and his image of the God whose "heart recoils" within him, whose "compassion grows warm and tender," who "will not come in wrath." My prayer is that we can sit with this image until it changes us all, until it brings us to our senses, that God might in the fullness of time return us to our homes.