

## Weekly Reading – Monday, July 30, 2007

The readings this week call us to a deeper relationship with God – the God who has always nurtured us and will not give up on us. We so foolishly place our trust in things and miss the richness of God. We are able to set aside all the things that have claimed us and divided us, because we have a new life in Christ.

Hosea 11:1-11

After a series of Old Testament readings in which God condemns the actions of the nation and threatens to sever relationship with the people, this beautiful text is filled with yearning and pathos, telling of a love deeper than our sin. God's love for Israel is rooted in the earliest memories of Israel's childhood.

The text is corrupted and scholars have pieced the evidence together in varying ways. More recent translations opt for the overwhelmingly feminine imagery of the God who is like a mother lifting her child to her breast, bending down to feed him. God is like a mother who eagerly reaches out to support her child's first steps. God's tender care is not acknowledged by a people who "did not know that I healed them". God's fierce love for us is rejected, by a people who are "bent on turning away from me".

Our rejection of God is inexplicable in light of God's steadfast love for us. God's words in Hosea call to mind the anguish of a mother whose child has forgotten her, of a father, whose love the prodigal has abused. The nation's idolatry is acted out at every level as the people turn to other gods, the leadership engages in schemes which result in war, and the oracle-priests do not speak truth. Even as the sword rages, consumes and devours, God speaks of a love which will not give up on Israel.

The sheer weight of God's love for Israel is overwhelming. God is presented in anthropomorphic terms as a parent, in anguish over the pain of a wayward child. Following this intensely intimate picture of God, like a mother caring for her infant, the word of grace is that God is not mortal. God's love far transcends human love. God is the wholly other. God's compassion outweighs God's fierce anger and God chooses to be for us the Holy One in our midst.

The glorious homecoming promised in the final two verses shifts the imagery away from human centered to that of the created order. It is as if the Divine love is drawing us beyond the realm of human affairs into a larger, almost cosmic realm. God is described as a lion, strong and beautiful. God's people are like birds, doves, who return from the far places of the earth with the promise of peace.

Colossians 3:1-11

On one level, this reading could lead a preacher to expound on the value of positive thinking. If we set our minds on things that are above then we will be given strength to get rid of the "earthly" things – evil desires, greed, sexual immorality and the like. However, our ability to reject "earthly" vices is not a matter of our own skill at setting our minds on "higher things", but rather, is rooted in the new life we have in Christ. We have, quite literally, died with Christ and Christ has become our life. To the listener who wants to say, "Surely you mean figuratively, as a manner of speaking", the writer of Colossians hastens to add that we live the resurrection life which for the present, is hidden with Christ in God. It is real in the present, but not yet fully revealed.

In this text, greed is equated with idolatry. When we grasp at things, we set them in place of God. Our greed tears at the fabric of a trusting relationship with God. Christians are told to get rid of anger, wrath, malice, slander, abusive language and lies, as if this were an easy thing. We struggle with these and often find it almost impossible “to put them to death.” The writer simply expects us to do so, in complete confidence that we can and will succeed, because we have been given a new self. We are being renewed in the image of our creator. All the divisions between us have been shattered and in Christ we are one, because Christ is all in all!

Luke 12:13-21

An inheritance can tear a family apart, or give them hope for the future. Families can erupt into open warfare over a small amount, and when a family business or farm is involved and the future hangs in the balance, the issue of inheritance can be all consuming. Jesus refused to arbitrate in an inheritance battle between two brothers. Instead he told a story.

We focus on the wrong things when we set our hopes on that which will vanish. The church I served in Iowa farm country had recently built a new sanctuary. The money was pledged to pay the mortgage, but there were months when the congregation struggled to make the mortgage payments, because much of the pledged amount was sitting in silos and storage bins, waiting for the price of corn or beans to go up. It makes perfect business sense to build bigger barns, put your money into improving the farm and provide the capacity to store the harvest until the market is good. What might make business sense, does not make sense on a spiritual level. In Jesus’ parable, the farmer is basically stingy. He clings to his goods in an opportunistic way. He rejoices in the security his success has bought him and is blindsided by the fact that nothing we do can provide us with real security. The farmer thought everything was going fantastically well, when in point of fact he was, in the words of the hymn “rich in things and poor in soul” (God of Grace and God of Glory).

When American Christians return from mission trips or interactions with Christians who have far less than most of us, they witness that the Christians who have so little have a wealth of soul visible in an infectious gratitude and joy. Jesus’ story has been used with a heavy hand in some stewardship sermons. In point of fact, the story has little to do with how we spend our money and far more to do with our basic attitude toward God and neighbor. Jesus points us to the fact that when we are possessed by our wealth, we miss being rich in relationship with God. When we seek security elsewhere, we cannot find the deeper joy which comes knowing that we are secure in God’s love.