

Proper 13 Year C: 3 / 4 August 2019  
St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY  
The Reverend Gary Cyr

Hosea 11: 1-11  
Colossians 3: 1-11  
Luke 12: 13-21  
Psalm 107: 1-9, 43

**“...people were created to be loved; material things / goods were created to be used and utilized. Not vice versa. ”**

Growing-up as a youth in the Roman Catholic tradition had many benefits. One of those was the folks-mass, which my home parish offered as one of two Saturday evening service. What I particularly enjoyed was the change in musical format where the songs seemed and sounded more personal. There are several songs that I still connect with, but one holds a special place in my heart. These are some of the words from that song:

Come back to me with all you heart  
Don't let fear keep us apart  
Trees do bend though straight and tall  
So must we to others' call

The wilderness will lead you  
Too the place where I will speak  
Integrity and justice  
With tenderness  
You shall know

Long have I waited for  
Your coming home to me  
And living deeply our new lives.

Sounding almost like poetry, these lyrics are from a song written by John Michael Talbot entitled *Hosea*. The song, sung from God's prospective, is based on the prophet Hosea and encapsulates the essence of the story's message: that a wayward Israel faces consequences for its abdication of the covenant with YHWH. A timeless message that is pertinent even today.

Written allegorically, the protagonist of the Book of Hosea seeks the return of a lover who has gone off to seek pleasure elsewhere – to seek comfort and surety from strangers, thus forsaking the beloved with infidelity. Put another way, God, as the protagonist, seeks Israel as the beloved only to watch as Israel forsakes the covenant in pursuit of foreign gods, customs, and practices.

Hosea and Gomer, his wife, embody a message of warning and destruction where elements of redemption and restoration resonate in spite of the underlying infidelity that envelops the two. Just last week, we heard the difficult language of that infidelity: whoredom – the act of prostituting one’s self to another in exchange for material gain. That is what most interpreters and preachers tend to focus on. I wonder though, if anyone ever questions whether Hosea tends to Gomer as a true marriage partner should?

What I am suggesting is that God might not have tended to the needs of Israel as faithfully as they desired or required. It is easy for us to argue that Gomer was a loose individual while ignoring that she had three children to support and we hear nothing of Hosea providing for them. When I look at the story through this perspective, Gomer did what needed to be done to meet those needs. Might the story, written allegorically, be suggesting that God, every once in a while, is the absent one? Yet, scripture continually paints God as the faithful One, The merciful One, The forgiving One. I do believe that each and every one of us can, at times in our own life, feel like God is indeed absent in the midst of our trials and tribulations, or that God remains silent when we need God most. How does one answer that thought?

Growing up, my father was the one who allowed my brother (who is seven years my senior) and I to try different things, often knowing that what we were about to do would satisfy our curiosity but would also have uncomfortable consequences. Like the time he was working on the lawn mower, tuning it up, and my brother wanted to touch the spark plug while the engine was operating. He got to do it and was none too happy about the shock it gave him. Or the time, as toddlers, we each wanted to extinguish our birthday candle by pinching it between our fingers only to realize afterwards that getting burnt is not very comfortable. Dare I mention the time I stuck a knife in the electrical outlet to see what would happen? My mother was never thrilled with these escapades, but valuable lessons were learned. It wasn’t that my father

wanted to harm my brother and me, nor was he ever absent when these events occurred. These were simply teaching moments where I and my brother were allowed to indulge our curiosity and desire to “have our way.”

When I approach the story of Hosea and Gomer as an allegory for God and Israel with this understanding from the experiences of my youth, it alters the story significantly and allows Gomer a measure of respect a more cynical reading does not allow for. It is not that God is absent from the lives of Israel. Rather, it is that God allows the Israelites a chance to engage the culture they exist in. God allows them to indulge their appetite, to satiate their hunger for more and more. However true that may be, God is not silent, for they are warned about their behavior. If only they had listened. But they do not.

The moral of the story is simple: greed leads to decay while gratitude leads to life. If only Israel was willing to admit its error. If only Gomer is willing to admit her desire for more. If only they could see the fruitlessness of their lustful desire for more. Then, and only then, can they return to a faithful relationship with God, who is the true source of life and abundance.

Not greed, but gratitude. That is the message Jesus imparts to his audience in today’s Gospel. It is a message that Jesus returns to often: the allure of materialism and the danger of allowing one’s self to be drawn into its web. Jesus knows full well that once a person is trapped by the culture’s drive for self-sufficiency that a hunger which cannot be satiated will emerge and thwart God’s desire for the well-being of all, not just a fortunate few. Scarcity in the midst of abundance is the danger. The loss of one’s soul the consequence. As the colloquial saying goes: There is enough in the world to meet every one’s needs; there is not enough to meet every one’s greed.

Our relationship with the various pleasures of the world is what St. Paul is alluding to in his letter to the Colossians. The shiny things that tempt us away from the spiritual path of following Jesus, just as the story of Hosea and Gomer personifies. Israel had taken up with foreign gods and pleasures; they had forsaken the covenant with YHWH and would soon experience exile at the hand of the Assyrians. Faithfulness to the spiritual path is called for, as St. Paul might argue, not instant gratification. We walk apart from Christ whenever we over indulge our appetite. Whatever form that indulgence takes, it falsely gratifies. We are always

left with wanting more. Hence the idea and warning about greed. But all is not lost, even when we walk apart from Christ, God is ever present – like a parent who allows their child to explore their desires and must face the consequences, God watches and cares for each of us, allowing even, for dire outcomes. Sometimes, lessons are learned best the hard way.

Each and every one of us, at one time or another, has walked apart from God. Each of us has a story to tell in that regard. Many are drawn to the materialism of a global market where excess is celebrated. Many build bigger and bigger “barns” to store what they have amassed, believing they do not yet have enough. Others have wandered into arenas of instant gratification, indulging their appetite for hedonistic pleasure. For all of these individuals, there will never be enough because the allure is so great; much more so than the spiritual path of following Christ. God, however, is never absent or necessarily silent during those times of our waywardness. God is constantly calling us back to the path of life. After all, want and need are manufactured by humanity’s hoarding tendencies. They are not of God’s design. But compassion and care of creation and one another, a generosity of spirit and selflessness - these are of God’s design.

Each and every one of us is invited to turn once again towards God and follow Christ’s lead. We need not fear God’s judgment for our waywardness because God is merciful and forgiving. We need not fear those moments of silence, times of feeling desolate in the wilderness of life, for that is when God speaks most tenderly to us. The spiritual path that Christ invites us to, is one of integrity and justice, and God is waiting our return to living in right-relationship with God, with one another, and with all creation.

Think of it this way: people were created to be loved; material things / goods were created to be used and utilized. Not vice versa. Thus, how we relate to one another in community is essential, for that is the heart and soul of the spiritual path, the path Christ invites us to walk, the journey of return to our God. May we have the courage and fortitude to answer God’s call to come back to a faithful and righteous life where we walk humbly with our God.