

Bible Study
Proper 12, Year C
July 24, 2016

[RCL] Hosea 1:2-10; Psalm 85; Colossians 2:6-15, (16-19); Luke 11:1-13

Hosea 1:2-10

These verses from the first chapter of Hosea present an affronted YHWH who seems at once both vindictive and indecisive. Israel has betrayed God, the people of the divided kingdoms have broken their covenant promise to worship YHWH alone. Consequences will follow: God's punishment is coming, God's pity and forgiveness are ending, and God's people are disowned. YHWH alone speaks in these verses, and in YHWH's words we hear hurt, anger, and perhaps most dramatically, the pain of estrangement. Despite the betrayals, despite Israel's unfaithfulness, God cannot help but to do what God does – peace-making, saving, and reconciling.

The marriage metaphor employed here may be both illuminating and confusing – the extreme power difference between the husband (Hosea, representing God) and the wife (Gomer, representing God's people) is disturbing for those who understand marriage as an equal partnership. Yet in the Ancient Near Eastern context, Israel's lack of faithfulness impacted YHWH's status and reputation relative to other deities, just as a wife's behavior would have been perceived to impact her husband's prominence and honor.

- Is there anything we can do to separate ourselves fully and permanently from God's love? And what does that answer say about the nature of God?
- What meaning(s) might we draw from the marriage metaphor by focusing alternately on the characters of Hosea and Gomer?

Psalm 85

Phrases from Psalm 85 are among the most well-known of all Psalmody; the language of restoration, peace, and righteousness comforts and reassures today's audience just as it did in its Ancient Near Eastern context. The different verb tenses employed by the Psalmist throughout these 13 verses speak to a profound eschatological vision. God's people rejoice at having been restored and forgiven, even as they anticipate fulfillment of prophecy and promised salvation. The Psalmist's duty, as declared in vs. 8, is to listen to God – not only through the stories and prophecies of the past, but through the movements and miracles of the present day.

- How might we understand ourselves to be living in an eschatological “in between” time, and what is our role/responsibility as God's people in such a time?
- The entreaties of vs. 5 and 6 are spoken with confidence. Do we have this kind of faithful trust in God's promises? If not, how might we cultivate it?

Colossians 2:6-15, (16-19)

These verses from the second chapter of Paul's letter to the Colossians might sound to our ears like an artfully-worded early Christian version of that popular 1970s slogan “Keep on keepin' on.” Paul describes the path of discipleship as a flourishing plant, with its roots in the reality of the Gospel Truth that Jesus Christ is Lord and messiah. Thanksgiving is the fruit Christ's disciples bear as they continually grow in faith.

Paul's concern here is that some church members may be lured away from the path of discipleship by false teachings – promises that someone or something other than Jesus of Nazareth represents a complete manifestation of God among humanity. Paul reminds his readers of the singular uniqueness of Jesus as the Christ, the only one who saves humanity from its own evils and liberates his followers from the accusations and oppressions of all earthly systems.

- What are the false teachings and traditions that deceive American Christians generally and the people in our faith communities today?
- Does Paul's language of being 'taken captive,' and of earthly captors being 'disarmed' by Jesus, erase or minimize our human agency? What is our responsibility and our duty regarding our own faithful conduct?

Luke 11:1-13

The unnamed disciple comes to Jesus with a simple yet profound request – “Lord, teach us to pray.” This request implies deep trust and a recognition that this teacher's instruction is uniquely precious and imbued with holiness. Jesus responds by offering to his disciples (and to us) that perfect prayer that is so familiar, having been recorded in the Gospels and included in our historic liturgies. He also articulates a link between prayer and persistence, a link which may challenge us to think differently about the practice and purpose of prayer. God will not give us snakes or scorpions, but neither do we always receive that thing for which we have asked. Jesus uses a parent/child metaphor to help the disciples understand his message about asking, searching, and knocking. The greatest gift we can hope to receive, the gift God provides to those who pray with persistence and faithfulness, is the Holy Spirit.

- Do we actually understand the words of the Lord's Prayer, words that we know by heart? What is “our daily bread?” Do we really “forgive everyone indebted to us?” And what is “the time of trial?”
- Verses 9 and 10 are often cited as reassurance that God will give us whatever we desire, as long as we pray hard enough. But how does the rest of the parent/child gift-giving metaphor inform our understanding of this prayerful asking and receiving?

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