

Pentecost 7C, Proper 12

July 24, 2022

All Saints', Littleton, NH

The Rev. Curtis Metzger

Hosea 1: 2-10

Psalm 85

Colossians 2: 6-19

Luke 11: 1-13

This morning we have an interesting assortment of readings that, simply said, could be about the danger of following false gods, the importance of faithfulness to God, and the practice of prayer that helps us get there and stay there.

The bit of the book of the prophet Hosea speaks to us of the importance of this faithfulness in an odd way. Hosea was a prophet in the Northern Kingdom of Israel in about the same period we have been hearing about in recent weeks – in the 9th and 8th centuries B.C. For several weeks we heard about Elijah and Elisha calling the King Ahab back to the worship of Yahweh. The reading from Amos last week echoed that. The Kings of the Northern Kingdom had started to leave the worship of Yahweh and worship other gods and the prophets were warning them.

In this morning's reading we hear Hosea saying that God called him to marry a harlot, and uses the naming of the children of that marriage as more warning. Scholars debate whether this was an actual marriage or allegory to make Hosea's point, for this word harlot or 'whoredom' as in our translation this morning, can, in Hebrew, also have connotations of being unfaithful to God. Regardless, the message comes through loud and clear. He marries a woman called Gomer, daughter of Diblaim. Gomer and Diblaim were not Jewish names, so the author is making the point about 'Israel' whoring around outside the faith, as it were.

And Hosea then names the children in succession, Jezreel, Lo-ruhamah, and Lo-ammi. The name Jezreel can evoke several things. It literally means 'God sows' or 'God inseminates', which could be related to the fact that it is Yahweh who is responsible for the fertility of the land, not Baal or other Canaanite gods – and so using this name is a way of castigating Israel for going after other gods. But the name also refers to the great city on the edge of the region of the Galilee and Samaria where Jehu who had been anointed King and overthrew Jehoram, son of Jezebel and Ahab; and murdered him, Jezebel, and hundreds of others who were close

to the family. Hosea is reminding the people of Israel how this wanton bloodshed offended God, regardless of the fact that Jehu said it was Yahweh who told him to do it. Of course, we in our time think of these horrendous mass murders as shocking and reprehensible, though sadly, we are becoming used to it in our own country. (sigh)

The second child, a daughter, is named Lo-ruhamah, which literally means 'no pity' or 'unloved'---Hosea's way of saying that Yahweh no longer cares for Israel. And the last child, a son, is named Lo-ammi, which means 'not my people' – the final expression of God's rejection of Israel. This tale of harlotry and unwanted children is the prophets way of showing the rejection of a people who have lost their way – who no longer worshipped Yahweh, who no longer were centered in faithfulness to God.

In Paul's letter we hear a similar kind of warning. In this portion of Paul's letter to the church in Colossus, Paul warns the Colossians of being distracted by other 'philosophies' ,or the worship of angels, or complicated ways of being Christian that some are teaching that have nothing to do with a true understanding of the centrality of Christ. His word to the church is that Christ is everything, he has purchased their lives with his life

and all is done and all is redeemed through Christ. Don't be distracted by these intricate philosophical systems that pull you off center and take Christ out of the center of your lives, your worship, and your prayer. It is not by complicated theologies or complicated prayers that we find our center in God (and here, as Episcopalians, we have to be careful – we have a very thick Prayer Book!). God is much more accessible, and faithfulness does not have to be unnecessarily complicated. Remember that Paul was a highly trained Pharisee, for whom, before his conversion, it was all about the observance of the law---all the little tidbits that showed you were truly faithful. His encounter with Christ showed how unnecessary all this previous 'observance' stuff had become – in fact it was dangerous to true faith!

Finally, in the gospel we have Jesus teaching about prayer. That the disciples questioned him about prayer and asked him to help them to pray was a very common question for disciples of gifted rabbis. They obviously observed something in him and his prayer life that drew them in and made them curious. They could tell that Jesus' prayer life grounded him in all that he did and said, and they wanted that too. Jesus' response in the

teaching of the 'Lord's Prayer' has deep meaning for each word and line, more than I could do justice in a simple sermon. But it is easy to note that it was very simple and short. Basically, it is an outline to a whole approach to prayer. Name God as your heavenly father/parent – the loving one who created you. Remember that the name of God is holy and in saying it, it should draw you into a cosmic connection. Pray for the 'reign of God' and the will of God on earth – this should open us up to trying to align our wills with God and to look for and work for God's kingdom. Pray for bread or daily sustenance and all that can mean, and remember it is ultimately God who provides.....on a daily basis – remember to be rooted in today and not get overly preoccupied with yesterday or tomorrow.

The next phrase is interesting: forgive us our sins/trespases as we forgive those who sin/tresspass against us. It is of course a conditional statement that puts the responsibility on us to be forgiven as we forgive. Forgiveness is key in being a follower of Christ. And, as any priest or counselor will tell you, forgiveness also liberates you because you let go of the grudge or anger that ties you down and consumes you!

The last phrase, as we commonly say it, is 'Lead us not into temptation', which leaves a little to be desired and understood in translation, because we don't believe that God would lead us into temptation, rather, a better translation for today, as we have in the Prayer Book as an alternative, is 'Save us from the time of trial, and deliver us from evil'. Even this needs a little picking apart. I think an even better reading would be to say save us IN the time of trial. We all have trials and we experience evil, but all of this tends to pull us into our false self (as Paul would say). I think the phrase is better understood less as an appeal to a heavenly power to rid us of all our trials and evil, but as a reminder to ourselves to stay rooted and connected to God in prayer, so that in the day of trials and evil, we will not succumb to the temptation of the response of the false self.

In expounding on all these little elements of the Lord's Prayer, I have run the risk of making it even more of something of a prayer checklist, but that is not at all what Jesus would have wanted. This prayer should be a simple, very simple reminder to go deeper and deeper and come awake to the living Christ in you. If, in fact, you practice this prayer not as a prayer

to be said but a guide for prayer, you would not be able to help yourself praying these elements almost reflexively. When we wake up to the Christ in us through practice, our response to Jesus teaching us these words would not be “Huh?”, but “Of course”. That is what he’s pointing at.

I like that in our service after lots of words from scripture, the preacher, the beautiful liturgy of the Eucharist, the last thing we do before receiving Communion is to recite the simple Lord’s Prayer together. For me, it’s a reminder that after all the fancy words, our real faith is an experience with the living God, and simple words can help ground us in that relationship. When you pray that prayer think of yourself dialing in to the powerful station of God whose radio waves run through you and all living things and makes us all one in Him....and remember your role in helping to make God’s kingdom ‘on earth, as it is in heaven.’