

## *The Counter-Intuitive Wisdom of Grace*

Ninth Sunday After Pentecost

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Texts: Hosea 1.2-10;  
Psalm 85;  
Colossians 2.6-15;  
Luke 11.1-13

Since I was at our church campout at Cran Hill last Sunday, I had to listen to Pastor Beth's sermon on our website earlier this week. She began with these words: "Black lives matter. All lives matter. Blue lives matter. Room For All. Don't ask don't tell. White Privilege. Affirmative Action. Prolife. Pro Choice."<sup>1</sup> She wasn't half way through that list when I said out loud (because I was in the privacy of my office) "whoa!" She finished that litany, of course, by saying "Did I make you squirm yet?" What Beth did as she moved her way through that very helpful, beautiful sermon was to call on us to listen deeply (even when the things we hear put us on edge) as an act of hospitality that can make us ready for action.

I was really grateful for those words as I was diving back into Hosea this week because you know what? The passage from Hosea put me on edge...did anyone else squirm a bit when you heard David read this text? It makes no difference to me if this is allegory or history. This business of Hosea marrying a woman whom the text calls a whore is offensive on about fifteen different levels. I'll just name three. This whole scenario only makes sense in a patriarchal context where men dominate and rule and woman are subordinate and submissiveness. It's only in that context that we could grasp that Hosea is demeaning himself by marrying such an "unworthy" woman. Then the fact that Hosea names his children in such a way as to include them in the circle of shame. Who does that? What kind of loving father would even consider such a thing? Which leads to the third offense. The reason Hosea does such a thing is because God tells him to!

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<sup>1</sup> You can hear or read the entire sermon from July 17 at this website:  
<http://hopechurchca.org/index.php/archives/>

Which raises some rather troubling questions about God. I was grateful for the challenge to listen deeply because my first reaction was to set Hosea aside and move on.

One of the challenges for us who love this book and read it with the full expectation that the Holy Spirit will reveal the Word of God to us through these words; one of the challenges is to listen deeply when the first pass is so hard to take. As we come back to this text we have to remember that the deep patriarchal assumptions embedded in this prophecy are NOT the point. They are not **the Word** that we are listening for. Those assumptions are like the back drop or maybe the scaffolding. Not the point. The point is actually something quite beautiful about God and about God's relationship with us. The God revealed to us in Hosea is a God who loves humanity passionately. This is a God whose heart breaks when we turn away; a God who loves us enough to rage at us when we are falling head long into self-destruction. As I said to the children today if you have a choice between someone who is distant, and passive, and dis-engaged or someone who is invested and attentive and passionate about you - which do you want? Which one of these describes love?

Hosea reveals to us a God who loves us and will not let us go. All of the ranting and raging is to grab the attention of Israel who are, as a manner of speaking, running straight into traffic. When God has their attention, our attention, the message takes an abrupt 180 degree turn. Vs. 9 "Then the Lord said, "Name (your son) Lo-ammi, for you are not my people and I am not your God." Whoa! Followed immediately by Vs. 10 "Yet, the number of the people of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea...in the place where it was said "You are not my people," it shall be said to them, "Children of the living God."

This theme of persistence and the counter-intuitive wisdom of grace continues as we move into the gospel for today. Over the last several weeks as we've been reading through Luke we've had some conflicting messages coming at us. As Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan we are told that the one thing we must do to inherit eternal life is to show mercy to our neighbor. Go and DO likewise...that is the ONE thing that matters most. Then last week we had the story of Mary and Martha (which our guest

preacher will be looking at again next Sunday). And Jesus's word to us in that story is that sitting at Jesus' feet, listening to the Word, is the ONE thing that matters most.

Is it any wonder that the disciples in our passage for today say to Jesus "Lord, teach us to pray." We don't know what to pray for. Does that question ever resonate as we look out at the world, the complete insanity that is our nation these days. What do we even pray for?

So Jesus gives to them that prayer that we have come to call the Lord's prayer. I encourage you this week to spend some time with that prayer. One petition at a time. Meditate on each line and you will rediscover the brilliance of this way of praying. It speaks to the paradox of the two teachings that come before it: the need to contemplate who God is and the need to act out of that contemplation. *To be still* as we sing in our call to confession and then to be *sent forth to live and to love* as we will sing in our call to prayer in a few moments.

Where Jesus goes next in his teaching about persistence was, for me, the most helpful piece of the Word to us today. What Jesus acknowledges in this next piece is how utterly exhausting it can be to follow after the way of God in a world that is hell-bent on destruction. Can I get an "Amen"? Do you feel tired? I feel tired. The disciples felt tired. The book of Hosea tells us that God felt tired. When we are tired, and we don't even know what to pray anymore, how do we break through the insanity, the resistance, the brokenness?

I was listening to a piece on NPR on Thursday morning. I wonder if any of you heard it? It was a fascinating piece that told the true story of a dinner party where a group of friends were gathered in a back yard to celebrate together drinking wine, sharing food, when an intruder breaks in and holds a gun to one of the women's heads and demands all their money. The person recounting the event talks about how panicked they felt. They didn't have any money. How at first they tried to shame the intruder "what would your mother think if she could see you now". That just enraged him more. Then they tried pleading with him. That didn't make a difference. Then one of the women finally said "you know we were just celebrating

together. Would you like to have a glass of wine with us?" That invitation completely shifted the dynamics of the moment. He lowered the gun. He took a glass of wine. Then he described this bizarre experience where the intruder let down his guard, ultimately asked them for a hug, and then left without harming anyone. The first reaction the man and his friends had was to think that this was a miracle.

Or was it? The piece went on to talk about a research project where psychologists are studying what they call "non-complementary behavior." We tend to mirror the emotional reactions of those around us. Someone comes at you with aggression and violence your instinct is to come right back at them with aggression (like they did when they tried to shame the man) or to cower and try to appease them (like when they begging and trying to bargain with him). Those are two complementary approaches to his threat; to escalate the aggression or to cower in fear in the face of his aggression. What the woman does when she offers him a glass of wine is non-complementary behavior. She meets his "hostility with warmth"<sup>2</sup> and it completely shifts the dynamic.

They go on to talk about how incredibly effective this is and how utterly difficult it is to pull off. When you think about people we admire who have been effective in the face of overwhelming times of insanity like Ghandi, Martin Luther King, Jr, Mother Theresa, Nelson Mandella, they have all been brilliant at this art of non-complementary behavior.

As I was listening to this story I noted that the commentator was debunking the idea that a miracle had occurred. I have to tell you I was actually quite grateful for the debunking because I am not all that interested in stories about "miracles" if by *miracles* we mean some divine intervention that interrupts the ordinary course of life. How does that help those of us who are stuck with the ordinary course of life? I want to understand how I can live today in a way that makes a difference; in a way that holds my utter dependence on God's grace together with my responsibility to act on the faith I proclaim.

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<sup>2</sup> Hear the full pod cast from July 15<sup>th</sup> at <http://www.npr.org/podcasts/510307/invisibilia>. The phrase, *meet hostility with warmth*, comes from the description of this podcast.

As I came back to this teaching from Jesus about prayer and persistence, I recognized the counter-intuitive wisdom embedded in this teaching just like the counter-intuitive wisdom I had just heard on that NPR piece. When we have deep needs that are not being met and we have asked and it seems that we do not receive, where does our instinct lead us to go? I don't know about you but I often go one of two places: I get angry and demanding or I get passive and sullen. This text invites us into a different space: to keep our eye on the beauty of our need with a gracious but persistent expectation. Not demand but expectation.

When we can hold the truth that God loves us passionately and will not let us go and as we begin to integrate some of this counter-intuitive wisdom of the gospel we will discover the deep truth of this Word to us today: "Ask and it will be given you; search and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you....If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father/Mother give the Holy Spirit to those who ask!"

Friends, this is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God!