

Hosea 11:1-11 Not Like a Human Being
Colossians 3:1-11
July 31, 2022

God is not a human being. Thankfully. Last week we read from the Book of Hosea, who married an adulterous woman. They had three children; Jezreel, Not Loved, and Not My People. And we saw that God's displeasure with Israel (the northern kingdom in the time of the divided monarchy) over its lack of faithfulness, was not absolute, but temporary. It appears to have been the source of a struggle within God's interior life; a battle between righteous wrath, to use one of the old words, and infinite love and mercy.

In terms of the old debates that Christians have been arguing about for centuries, the struggle in the inner life of God is mirrored by a similar struggle among human beings, in the inner lives of people. One way of speaking about this struggle is the inner motivation that pushes people in the direction of being good, doing good.

On the one hand, there is the drive to be good in order to get something out of it, as a way of earning a reward, or avoiding a punishment. On the other, there is the drive to be good as an expression of gratitude and love, the product of grace, an acting out of a transformed life, expecting nothing in return.

Biblical faith clearly engages the struggle. We have all heard about works righteousness, or legalistic religion, in which there are requirements for acceptance. One is

good in order to gain entrance into the community of the accepted. We see in scripture a different emphasis, characterized by the phrase, "justification by faith," which proclaims that we *have been* accepted, and that acceptance is the source of any attempts of our goodness.

It is apparent that there was a struggle among the early Christians, such as the one's in the city of Colossae, to whom Paul wrote the letter of that name. The bad way of life is clearly demonstrated. Paul mentions sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed. These are associated with the approach of God's wrath. He also includes another list; anger, rage, and malice, filthy language, and lying.

But Paul gives no hint that God's acceptance is somehow attached to successful attempts at clearing out the negatives, any more than successful attempts to achieve the good. Rather, he proclaims that something has already changed. He puts it this way, "We have already died and been raised with Jesus." we/you have already been accepted by God. . . .

As a result it is meaningful to set our minds on the things above, put on the new self, which is being renewed. In other words, God has already resolved God's own inner conflict, and I am not sure there is a better expression of that resolution than what we find in the book about Hosea the prophet, who married a prostitute, and had three children, so inaptly named.

As the lectionary has shifted from chapter one to chapter eleven, essentially from the beginning to the end, a concise summary may be in order. The better part of chapters two through ten is spent by the prophet representing God as going back and forth between the intention to destroy Israel and its people, and the determination to love and restore it. There is kind of whiplash involved in reading it.

And then we come to chapter 11, which seems to resolve the tension;

“How can I give you up, Ephraim,
How can I hand you over?

My heart is changed within me,
All my compassion is aroused.

I will not carry out my fierce anger,
Nor will I turn and devastate Ephraim.

For I am God, and not a human being,
The Holy One among you.

This text is among the most majestic in all the bible. Let me suggest that the victory of mercy and love over judgment and wrath should not be seen as a back and forth struggle in the person of God. It is a struggle for us, but not for God. The conclusion was drawn that the struggle in God’s character was resolved before the foundation of the world.

And it is expressed no more clearly than in the example of Jesus, whom we call Christ, and we call Jesus, Christ, or “anointed,” for the very reason that in his sacrifice we see the resolution of all inner conflict. Jesus is God, revealing the victory of mercy over judgment.

Of course, the problem for us is that *we are human beings*, and it is burdensome to carry the divine weight on our shoulders. Paul writes, “Put on Christ . . . “ We do, however, at least know about the divine example.

Perhaps the best way to understand the prophet Hosea, and really all the other prophets too, is that they understood God the way they understood themselves, with the inner struggle and everything. The analogy is useful, seeing the world in terms of one’s own experience.

From time-to-time, however, a discovery is made about God’s true nature, for Christians, exemplified in Christ. But for Hosea, who came along before Jesus, the same discovery happens in this resolution in which God decides *not to execute the fierceness of his anger*. And it is associated with holiness.

And, understanding it in this way, perhaps the best response is simply to let it wash over us, to stand or sit silently before it, with awe and wonder and amazement, like we do the ocean, or the vastness of outer space, or the cross. Little by little, it will have its way with us.

Actually, the cycle goes around again in the 12th and 13th chapters of Hosea, before the final chapter concludes with a blessing. I thought I would leave part of that blessing with you as a prayer, not one to be spoken so much as one to be listened to and heard. It doesn't speak of the ocean or outer space, but it does mention the trees, which have their own majesty. It is hard for people to think of God without resorting to nature, which is God's handiwork:

“I will heal their waywardness
and love them freely,
for my anger has turned away from them.
I will be like the dew to Israel;
he will blossom like a lily.
Like a cedar of Lebanon
he will send down his roots;
his young shoots will grow.
His splendor will be like an olive tree,
his fragrance like a cedar of Lebanon.
People will dwell again in his shade;
they will flourish like the grain,
they will blossom like the vine . . .

For God is not like a human being, let us give thanks to God.

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