

Love and Prayer

Oh boy, the prophet Hosea is a challenge for a preacher. The prophet's life is a metaphor or parable about God and His people. The prophet takes an unfaithful wife, accepts children not his own, and brings her back to his home after she has abandoned him. We are to see in this parable God loving an unfaithful people, accepting even their sins and weaknesses, bringing them back when they have turned their backs on Him. The ultimate message is of forgiveness and mercy, but it gets there down an unsettling and painful road.

I much prefer the alternative lesson from *Genesis* that we didn't hear today. It's the story of Abraham bargaining with God over saving Sodom and Gomorrah. Remember the story: Abraham keeps ragging on God to save the cities if there are righteous people there, first fifty, then forty-five, then forty, then thirty, then twenty, then ten. I defy you to read that story without smiling, if not laughing out loud. Though the church is not Comedy Central, it has its funny side. Abraham bargains with God for the life of a sinful city, Sodom. It's straight out of Saturday Night Live. Imagine Abraham played by Woody Allen and God played by Morgan Freeman – or Whoopi Goldberg. We can laugh out loud at the story of the ancient Jewish patriarch bargaining with a willing God for the life of a sinful, pagan city. It's a funny story with serious points: a merciful God who is powerful yet available; the willingness of God to respond to His people; the comfort of Abraham in approaching this mysterious God who has called Abraham and his wife Sarah to be blessings for the whole human race; the need to care for the stranger; the power of scriptural stories to tell us about God and about ourselves; and many more lessons. Centuries later, a dead serious and resurrectionally-oriented Lord Christ will tell a story with a smile upon His face about a big, hulking camel trying to get through the eye of a needle held in the delicate hand of a seamstress; it's a very funny image.

We have been born into a mysterious reality that will continually beckon us into the fascinating unknown. Physicists, astronomers, engineers, biologists, environmentalists, poets, novelists, painters, musicians, mothers, fathers, friends, even enemies, and so many more – teach us about this amazing reality we name God's creation. Let us, part of the community of Christian faith, reflect upon the greatest two of the mysteries committed to our stewardship.

The first great spiritual mystery we live within is that God cares passionately about Her creation. That there is a God is not much of a mystery; most of the world's people believe this, though we name that Reality differently. But that the God of this gigantic, amazing, subtle, beautiful universe – and of perhaps an infinity of other unknown universes – that this God is interested in the goings-on within that universe is indeed a mystery. Our people see the Lord we know, a Jewish carpenter out of a backward province two thousand years ago, as God intimately united to God's creation. In that union of divinity with humanity, our people perceive an even greater grandeur to our existence than the original creation exhibited. We stand breathless before this astonishing claim. Even more jaw-dropping is the reason behind that original creation and subsequent transformation: that God loves. God is not just intellectually intrigued by this amazing creation; He is also totally enamored of it, willing to extend Himself for its welfare, wanting to just *be*, to be together with every part of His created loveliness. That means you and me, as well as all the rest.

So this is the first great mystery: God's amazing love manifested through original creation at the very beginning and intimate union through Jesus Christ.

The second great mystery is exhibited by our scriptural readings this morning: the existence, mechanics, and power of prayer. Abraham prays to God about Sodom; God responds. The Lord Christ gives a model of prayer to His followers and then talks about how prayer works.

- +Jesus talks of God as One who loves as a father,
- +the beauty and goodness of that Divine Father (“hallowed be your name”),
- +the priority of God’s intent rather than our own (“your kingdom come”),
- +God’s willingness to provide the necessities of life (“give us each day our daily bread”),
- +God’s willingness not to be offended by our mistakes as long as we are willing to forgive others their mistakes (“forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive”),
- +God’s willingness to lead into safety and security (“lead us not into temptation”), as well as adventure and wonder.

After giving His model prayer, Jesus goes on to talk about the importance of persistence in prayer through time; it is God’s validation of our experience of time, of possessing our existence piece by piece, second by second, rather than all at once. Sometimes we ask for mistaken things, like snakes or scorpions; sometimes we ask for helpful things like eggs and fishes. But God always hears and gives us what we really want, the fullness of life that comes through God’s own Spirit, God’s own involvement in who we are and what we do. Imperfect as we are, if we can love our children, and work for their benefit, how much more will God, this infinite Lover, do for Her children, each and every one of us. But God wants engagement with us, and so He asks that we ask. This is what we call prayer, our conversation with God. We never have to worry about asking for the wrong thing, because God always translates our prayer into what is best for us; this is the operation of the Holy Spirit.

This is the second greatest mystery in the spiritual universe: the existence and power of prayer. We simply don’t know how it operates. But it does. And we should. When we ask, God gives; when we search, God comes; when we knock, God throws open the door and embraces us with adamant love that will not be frustrated.

We would not end this little meditation this morning without acknowledging the grace and favor given to us for the past few years in Deacon Catherine. You far more than I know her devotion to our Lord and to you, the Lord’s people. We have shared pilgrimage with her for awhile, pilgrimage toward the God who loves us beyond measure, pilgrimage in which Deacon Catherine has taken special responsibility to our Lord and Savior Jesus for the care of souls in this parish. We are more than thankful for her devotion and work. We will keep her in our prayers, as we ask her to continue to pray for us. Here’s a wonderful prayer from our Prayer Book: O God, whose fatherly care reaches to the uttermost parts of the earth: We humbly ask you graciously to behold and bless those whom we love, especially Deacon Catherine, soon to be absent from us. Defend her from all dangers of soul and body; and grant that we, drawing near to you, may be bound together by your love in the communion of your Holy Spirit, and in the fellowship of your saints; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

And while we’re praying, let us pray for those who shall choose a rector for this parish: Almighty God, giver of every good gift: Look graciously on your Church, and so guide the minds of those who shall choose a rector for this parish, that we may receive a faithful pastor, who will care for your people and equip us for our ministries, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Our people are about love and prayer. It's serious business, but let's not forget that there's lots of fun and laughter, too. If you ever get down, just a little depressed at all there is to do in a lifetime, have I got a story for you. It seems that once upon a time there was this large sinful city, a big hungry whale, and a reluctant, cranky Jewish prophet named Jonah...

The Reverend Canon Mark Shier