

August 4, 2019

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Hosea 11:1-10; Luke

God's Kanga

My two children have just twenty-two months between them. This means there was a good chunk of time when there was baby, or baby and toddler, or toddler and one just leaving toddlerhood. This means there was a good chunk of time when going anywhere meant hauling not just them but the stuff they needed, including all the stuff needed because they had not yet achieved control of certain bodily systems. If you were going anywhere you needed to take changing equipment—changes of everything—you never knew when bowel movements could get explosive, demolish entire outfits. That's some time ago, my children are now high schoolers, and probably not thrilled about a scatological sermon introduction involving them... But it is so vividly memorable to me, for many reasons, but especially the feeling when I realized I could leave the house and didn't need to bring a diaper bag!

Little children seem to require a lot of stuff. Go to any baby store or baby shower and you realize how much stuff they must need, more than you had even imagined. Back when my husband and I lived in rural Tanzania we used to marvel that there it seemed all the equipment needed for a baby was a kanga, a kanga being one of those brightly colored pieces of African cloth. Kangas have numerous decorative and practical uses, but chief among them is as a sling for a baby, or toddler, you've maybe seen this how in parts of Africa and other places in the world infants are worn like backpacks, their tiny shoulders and bottoms are tucked in and wrapped up all snug, it's just their heads peeking out of the brightly colored kanga. That was it, all the equipment needed, something to keep the baby close. Interestingly enough, I read somewhere that because of this simplicity, in places like Tanzania toilet training happens earlier and more intuitively, because of the lack of Pampers, which are so absorbent they can deter bowel awareness, and also because of the closeness to their mother, who senses the child's needs and knows when they need to expel things, or just periodically encourages them to do so, rid themselves of ... stuff.

Most Americans have a lot of ... stuff. I know I do. I don't haul it around in diaper bags, and it would make sense to expel some of it periodically. Instead, like so many others, I try to find creative ways to store it. There's a whole industry around this, about finding places to put your stuff, there are books and TV shows about it, there are buildings devoted to it, places people pay to hold all their stuff, storage facilities. Or in terms of today's parable, bigger barns. There's one such facility on Addison that especially makes me think of today's gospel parable, and how it ends, because of its name, which seems to me ill chosen, this particular chain is called Life Storage. I see it and I think of this parable, I think, that's what you want to do with your life? Store it?!

Christian faith offers another attitude toward life, another attitude towards possessions, another understanding of what treasure is and where it is found. In today's gospel reading Jesus has pointed things to say about our attachment to things and our attachment to God, but this New Testament reading does not introduce a new Biblical theme. Jesus' teaching about possessions and the point of life is very much in line with the prophetic tradition of ancient Israel. This summer for the Old Testament reading we've been hearing from prophets: Elijah, Elisha, Amos, and now Hosea. The prophets have much to say about people's attachments and how misplaced

they often are. A couple weeks ago I noted that Amos was not easy listening, but Hosea, whom we hear today, might be even harder, especially the chapters before the one we hear from today. Start with chapter one of the book of Hosea and you will find much of it is tough reading, replete as it is with castigation, condemnation, and one very difficult metaphor. The first several chapters of Hosea repeatedly liken Israel to a prostitute—but using an even harsher word...

The language of Hosea is harsh. And there are very good reasons to take issue with this particular metaphor, prostitution, particularly from a feminist standpoint. Aspects and implications may be problematic—and may also miss the point. The prophet Hosea is beside himself with outrage and grief, is distraught to and beyond the point of anger and logic, is using wrenching language to call attention to the worst possible thing people can do, which has nothing to do with sex and money but is about infidelity. The main concern of the prophet Hosea is infidelity to God, infidelity which is faithlessness, or faith in the wrong things, a displacement of value, a giving one's heart and mind and soul to something not worthy of it, something not worthy of one's trust and treasure.

This same concern is sounded by a later prophet, named Jesus. The same point is made in today's gospel parable.

Having too much stuff is a first world problem, and more than that, too. God isn't telling us to clean out our closets, God wants us to have clean hearts. We plead for that, in song, every Sunday, as we bring forward our offerings, "Create in me a clean heart O God." It is no accident that that song is sung then. Being generous is a way we can make room in our hearts for more than just our ... stuff, make room for God. God wants us to have clean hearts, and God will do whatever it takes to make that possible, will help clear out our hearts, clear out our minds, will come among us as a human being who said things like, "Blessed are the poor," who spent time with people from all walks of life, who was friends with prostitutes, who called tax collectors and rich young rulers to also come and follow him.

God's generosity, God's generous love, even and especially for the least likely, the least grateful, the least expected, is made flesh in Jesus, but we see who God is not just in the New Testament, but in the Old Testament as well, including in Hosea. Renowned theologian Walter Brueggemann says that the latter part of Hosea, especially chapter 11 is "among the most remarkable oracles in the entire prophetic literature." Yet another commentator notes that here "We penetrate deeper into the heart and mind of God than anywhere in the Old Testament."

We see the heart and mind of God in the what is actually the most striking metaphor that Hosea uses, the metaphor we heard today, that of God as a parent, a mother, a nursing mother. God says of Israel: "I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them." God says, "I taught him to walk, took them up in my arms." God says, "I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love." "With bands of love..." You can almost picture God taking a kanga and tying her child to her back. God knows all the equipment that is really needed. When that child becomes distracted, skips away to worship other deities, when that child responds to God's devotion with rebellion, God feels the deep pain of a rejected parent and righteous anger, too, but above all, the prophet Hosea announces, above all God is compassionate. "How can I give you up?" God says of her wayward child, "My compassion grows warm and tender. I am God and no mortal, the holy one in your midst, and I will not come in wrath." Like a loving mother—and also far beyond all mortal, motherly love—God comes to us, not in wrath, but in gentleness, in humbleness, in incarnate love beyond measure, God comes into our midst and binds a cross to her back.