

What Comes First?

Hosea 11:1-11

Crossroads Christian Church

Luke 12:13-21

July 31, 2016 Pentecost 11 C

What comes first? I'm not going to ask you about chickens or eggs this morning, but about what comes first in terms of priority. Where does our faith, where does God, fit into our lives? Two bumper stickers said it all: One car's bumper proclaimed, "God is my copilot." The car next to it responded on its' sticker, "If God is your copilot, change seats."

To get us thinking about priorities, let's look at our scriptures. Hosea was an Eighth-Century prophet, preaching at a pivotal time in Israel's history. The nation was prospering—the rich people, anyway—and things seemed secure, but it was decaying spiritually. People were worshiping false gods and ideologies who they thought would bring them more prosperity, while ignoring their covenant obligations to be just and merciful to the poor. Hmmm. Sounds familiar. They were on the brink of trouble, but no one wanted to challenge the status quo. Well, almost no one. First, Amos did, pointing out that God hated their solemn assemblies, demanding that justice should roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream. Then along came Hosea, who stewed and stewed over the unfaithfulness of the people of Israel, and why they had strayed so far from their covenant with the living God; why they had ignored the God who had saved them and made them a nation, and who sold their souls to the highest bidder. God called Hosea to do a shocking thing. Hosea married a faithless woman, a prostitute who was used to selling her body for the highest bidder, "for the people of this land commit great prostitution by deserting the Lord." They had kids. The naming of these kids could almost be considered a form of child abuse. The first, a son, was named Jezreel, remembering how King Jehu had spilled blood at that place. The second, a girl, was named Not Pitied, because the people of Israel should expect no pity from God. The third, a son, was named Not My People, because Israel was no longer God's people. Gomer, naturally, grew tired of this crazy old prophet and left him, and became a sermon illustration for him—as my wife left me, so you, O Israel, have left your God. Then he goes on to preach on Israel's sin and how she will go into captivity. But then comes chapter 11. Hosea changes metaphors. Instead of God being the jilted lover, the betrayed husband, God is the loving, grieving parent of a wayward child. God knows that the nation's destructive ways are going to lead to terrible things, but now God seems to be feeling pity more than justice. The people have broken their bonds of love to God, but God's bonds of love are still strong, and they're breaking God's heart. Any of us who have had children that have gotten into trouble with the law, that have got caught up in addiction, that have gone down destructive paths in their lives know instantly what God is talking

about here. It's the voice of anguished love. "The more I called them, the more they went away from me." I taught them to walk; and they walked away to sinful and corrupt lives. God "was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks;" who "bent down to them and fed them." Such tenderness! Such love! Such pathos. Such heartbreak. God's compassion burns for them, even though God knows that justice will bring destruction to them. Will God punish them? Sadly, yes. Will God forsake them? For heaven's sake, no.

So here is a story of what can happen when we don't include God's love and love of neighbor in our priorities; we break God's heart, and mess up our own lives.

It's interesting that the lectionary puts Hosea's story together with a character from a parable of Jesus, who was a master storyteller, and we still tell his stories today.

Like Hosea's story of a land which had sold its soul for easy profits, Jesus talks about a wealthy, self-satisfied, and self-absorbed person—and who also was unknowingly on a path to destruction.

The story begins with a request—"Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." Here was a family conflict over money—no surprise, huh? Probably mixed in were sibling rivalry, the question of who had the most power in the family.

Jesus refuses to be judge, and tells them a story—not of conflicted brothers, though he did that elsewhere in Luke 15, but of greed; of finding your self-worth in the worth of your possessions. Let me read it again from the Contemporary English Version: "The farm of a certain rich man produced a terrific crop. He talked to himself: 'What can I do? My barn isn't big enough for this harvest.' Then he said, 'Here's what I'll do: I'll tear down my barns and build bigger ones. Then I'll gather in all my grain and goods, and I'll say to myself, Self, you've done well! You've got it made and can now retire. Take it easy and have the time of your life!'"

Let me interrupt here. This is called the parable of the rich fool. Jesus' problem with the man isn't that he's rich, or that he has a good crop, or that he wants to build new silos to store it. None of that makes him a fool. He's worked hard and wants to take it easy—most of us when we get to retirement age go along with that line of thinking. No, the reason that he's a fool is that he thinks that his prosperity, his bins full of crops, his dreams of comfort and pleasure, are all that he needs. He's the center of his own universe. He thinks of himself as a self-made man. Did you notice all the time he repeated the pronoun "I" and "My?" 5 or 6 times, at least—then he talks to himself, "Self," he says, "you've done well." Even his third-person speech is first person! He's full of himself. His self-worth and net-worth are one and the same thing.

So let's let Jesus finish the parable: "Just then God showed up and said, 'Fool! Tonight you die. And your barnful of goods—who gets it?' "That's what happens when you fill your barn with Self and not with God."

You can't take it with you. But maybe it all depends on where your worth comes from. The rich fool from our parable may have had the bumper sticker "The guy with the most toys when he dies wins" on the back of his camel. But our worth isn't in our toys; our worth isn't in the power we have over those who work under us; our worth isn't in our wealth or our stock portfolio; our worth isn't stored in barns. Our worth is in the worth we are given as a child of a loving God. If we ignore that, like the Israelites of Hosea's time or the fool in Jesus' story, then our souls shrivel as our bank accounts increase. What comes first in our lives? Love God, with all your heart, soul, mind and strength—and love your neighbor as yourself. As you do that, you will live, and will have life abundantly. Amen.

by Michael E. Dixon