

Pentecost 10
18/8/2019

Mark the Evangelist

Hosea 6:4-6

Psalm 40

Colossians 2:6,7, 13-15

Matthew 9:9-13

God's unrighteous mercy

In a sentence:

Mercy is unwarranted yet needed by us all

*For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,
the knowledge of God rather than burnt-offerings.*

Hosea seems to propose here a choice: fertile mercy or barren cult. Which would you choose?

And yet, at the same time, the whole sweep of Hosea's preaching is directed at Israel's violation of the divine covenant. He would not, then, contradict commandments regarding Temple worship. Rather, with the rhetorical overreach of the preacher, he shocks his listeners into awareness of what is going wrong.

Hosea's point, then, is not that religious observances should cease but that we see mercy, kindness and steadfast love¹ to be what the sacrifices *signify*. The crucial thing is that – for Israel and for us – mercy *breaks the mould* so far as sacrifice is usually understood. It is this re-figuring – re-signification – of sacrifice which Hosea calls Israel to return to: understand what you are doing.

Typically understood, the possibility of a sacrifice means that we are in a system of exchange. Sacrifice offers this *in response to* that, this *to effect* that. These exchanges reflect that there is a *need* which must be met. The perceived need for sacrifice, then, casts our lives as a problem – an equation to be balanced – and the sacrifice brings balance.

The need might be that we will have to stop working someday, so we sacrifice some of today's pay for tomorrow's need. The need might be that we could get sick, crash the car or burn our home down, so we sacrifice in the form of insurance. Or we are lonely or sad, so we sacrifice vocation or responsibility for binge-watching on Netflix; or we feel poorly understood at home and so sacrifice fidelity for an affair. We are afraid, so we sacrifice the needs of refugees in order to remain safe and keep the economic system stable.

There is nothing especially 'religious' about sacrifice. It is a strategy for dealing with religious or secular powers according to the ordering of the powers: when here, do this.

¹ The translation of the Hebrew word under the NRSV's 'steadfast love' varies considerably in the commentaries and versions: goodness, kindness, mercy, and steadfast love are all offered as translations.

Hosea's challenge to Israel is that it acquiesced into this general understanding of sacrifice – something thought almost to 'force' God to act because the ritual is done properly. This is religion as *calculation*, as a way of manipulating the gods into giving us what we need. Prayer becomes magical incantation, as if God also has an equation to be balanced.

Yet what Israel received in its sacrificial rituals was a hijacking only of the *form* of contemporary religious practice. The *substance* – what the sacrifices signified – was completely re-ordered.

This is the point of Hosea's reminder: sacrifice to *this* God has to do with mercy. But it is crucial that we see how this breaks the typical understanding of sacrifice, because mercy *breaks* systems of exchange. Mercy is the giving of something which is not warranted by the rules: it is a refusal to balance the equation. As much as anyone one of us might *need* mercy, none of us could ever 'deserve' it as a right or a thing earned. 'Deserved' mercy is not mercy; it is payment according to the rules.

When mercy does enter the equation, something very odd takes place. No longer is a sacrifice made in order to *secure* what we need – to secure 'righteousness'. Rather, *righteousness itself is sacrificed*. The appeal for mercy – for God's steadfast love in the face of our lack of love – is an appeal for the rules to be broken.

And now we come to the heart of the matter – God's own heart. For the righteousness which is sacrificed in the death and life of Israel is God's own righteousness, the demands of the law, *set aside* in the sign of the sacrifice or, as it was later put, nailed to the cross (Colossians 2.13f). Those reconciled with God *here* are *unrighteously* righteous.

We nail God's righteousness to the cross, in the person of Jesus. Mercy – incomprehensibly – makes that sacrifice *God's very own*. Our offering to God is made into the mercy of God, the casting aside of righteousness. In reconciliation, God meets our unrighteousness with his own; this is the meaning of mercy and so the substance of our lives before God and with each other.

And so Hosea calls for a people like this: a people among whom it is not known what will happen next, for they are incomprehensibly merciful and the rules of exchange do not apply. This would be a people among whom the strong don't do with the weak what is usually done, the rich don't do with the poor what is usually done, the old don't do with the young and the young don't do with the old what is usually done, the citizen does not do with the foreigner what is usually done with foreigners.

To be such a people is to be surprised – literally, over-taken – by mercy. When the rules are broken it cannot be known what happens next, and there finally enters the possibility of something new under the sun. The dead could even stop being dead. Imagine that, and you're beginning to imagine the possibilities of mercy.

Mercy is not right and so makes no sense, and so mercy is just what is needed in a world in which we are crushed by what is sensible, by what 'has' to be done.

Praise God, then for unrighteous mercy, and let us commit ourselves to become the mercy we seek.
