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8/1/10

From the Heart

Hosea 11:8b

Thomas Jefferson made many notable contributions to American history. One of the most important was his authorship of the Declaration of Independence in 1776. When Jefferson's draft was submitted to the Continental Congress a number of revisions were made. Many of these revisions were minor and did not have that much impact on the document. But historian David McCullough has pointed out that one change was substantial and deeply wounded Jefferson. McCullough describes this particular revision in these words:

To the long list of indictments against the King, Jefferson had added one assailing the English people, "our British brethren," as a further oppressor, for allowing their Parliament and their King "to send over not only soldiers of our common blood, but Scotch and foreign mercenaries to invade and destroy us." And therein, Jefferson charged, was the heart of the tragedy, the feeling of betrayal, the "common blood" cause of American outrage. Jefferson wrote, "These facts have given the last stab to agonizing affection, and manly spirit bids us renounce forever these unfeeling brethren. We must endeavor to forget our former love for them."

This most emotional passage of all was too much for many in Congress, and to it Jefferson had added a final poignant note: "We might have been a free and great people together." Nearly all of this was removed. There was to be no mention of a "last stab," or "love," or of the "free and great people" that might have been (David McCullough, *John Adams*, pages 134-135).

Jefferson understood that the break with England was more than a political and military reality. Jefferson saw this as the dismantling of a family and it broke his heart. It pained him deeply to break the bonds of compassion that connected him to the British people. He felt compelled to speak from the heart about his grief that the British people had broken the family tie by permitting mercenaries to be sent. So Jefferson reluctantly concluded, "We must endeavor to forget our former love for them."

The same kind of emotion is at play in the 11th chapter of Hosea. But here it is God who grieves over the dismantling of a beloved family. Hosea lived during a time of chaos and upheaval. The Northern Kingdom of Israel had just split from the Southern Kingdom which came to be called Judah. The regional super powers, Egypt and Assyria, were closing in on these weakened Jewish states. The people seemed not to recognize the spiritual implications of their precarious situation. They were falling away from the practice of their faith in their desperate search for security.

In Hosea 11 we are given a glimpse into the heart of God in the midst of this crisis. This chapter is a divine soliloquy in which the prophet hears the Lord meditating on his relationship with the chosen people (Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching Through the Christian Year*, page 355). God is grieving over the rebellion of his beloved children. Israel is his son. The family bond is strong. But the people have stubbornly broken that bond by rejecting God and chasing after the gods of money and security. Justice demands that the people

should suffer the consequences of what they have done. So the sentence is pronounced. The people will be conquered and return to their former state of exile and slavery.

The spiritual condition of the people was later evoked by Jesus in a parable in Luke 12. It is the story of a wealthy man who is obsessed with the pursuit of security. His decisions about the future make no reference to his responsibility to family or community. He does not talk to God or to other people about his plans. He worships his possessions and what they can do for him. He has forgotten that his life is sustained by his relationship with God and other people. When his life comes to a sudden end the foolishness of his behavior is exposed. Life is never about possessions. It is about being part of a family which is rooted in God.

The inability of Hosea's people to grasp this truth is what breaks the heart of God. But Hosea tells us that God is not able to carry out the just sentence that has been pronounced on a foolish people. The bonds of compassion are not so easily broken. God cannot follow the path of forgetting his former love for his destructive children. God's soliloquy reaches its climax in verse 8 where we read:

How can I give you up, Ephraim?

How can I hand you over, O Israel?

My heart recoils within me;

My compassion grows warm and tender.

The mandate of God's justice gives way to the tender mercy that resides in the heart of God.

The American invasion of Italy during World War II taught a young G. I. an important lesson about listening to his heart. Leon Weckstein was part of the American force that was advancing on the Tuscan town of Pisa, which was occupied by German troops. The Americans were taking heavy casualties from German artillery fire which was being delivered with great accuracy. It was obvious that the Germans had an excellent observation point for directing the fire. Intelligence units ruled out every possibility except the town's famous landmark, the Leaning Tower. The soldiers called this 185-foot tower the "Tiltin Hilton."

Weckstein was assigned to take a radio man and get close enough to the tower to find out if the Germans were inside. If they were the radio man would place a call to a destroyer moored offshore whose cannons would blast the tower to dust. The fate of the tower was in Weckstein's hands and he had never even heard of the Leaning Tower of Pisa.

It took them an hour to reach an olive grove less than a mile from the tower. It was a very hot night with fleas attacking their sweaty bodies. Weckstein raised his telescope for his first view of the tower. He could see the silhouette of the old bells which hung in silence near the top of the tower. He trained his scope up and down the arches of the tower looking for movement. And then something happened he did not expect. He was hypnotized by the beauty and grace of the tower. For a few moments he forgot why he was there. He forgot about the friends who may have been killed by the shells directed from this tower.

When the moment of reverie passed he was faced with the most important decision of his life. He could not get a clear enough view to determine whether the Germans were using the tower. Then he made his decision. He should play it safe and have the tower destroyed so the Germans would not be able to use it to kill Americans. This was the military logic that he had been taught. He turned to his radio man to give the order that would cause the monument to be destroyed. He opened his mouth, but the words would not come. Military necessity called for the destruction of the tower, but his heart would not let him do it (Rory Carroll, *The Guardian*, January 14, 2000).

This is where Hosea's soliloquy leads. Justice demands the punishment of an unfaithful people. It requires that the injured party endeavor to forget a former love. But God's heart will not let him do it. The love which comes from the heart of God will never be forgotten. That love secures our lives.