

Sermon: "As One Who Lifts Infants"

Scripture: Hosea 11:1-4, Luke 11:1-13

Sunday, July 31, 2022

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Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading is Hosea 11:1-4. The book of Hosea is rich in imagery and symbolic action. God's steadfast love to Israel is compared to the faithful husband of an unfaithful wife. Other metaphors in Hosea that deepen our understanding of God's character include the physician, the lion, and the cypress tree. In today's reading, God is compared to the tenderness of a mother in her devotion to her young children. Listen for the word of God.

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.

² The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals and offering incense to idols.

³ Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk; I took them up in my arms, but they did not know that I healed them.

⁴ I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them. Amen.

Our Gospel reading is Luke 11:1-13. Luke includes teachings on prayer in his travel narratives as Jesus gets closer to his destiny of Jerusalem. In the previous chapter Jesus taught a new standard of hospitality in the parable of the *Good Samaritan* and enjoyed the hospitality of Mary and Martha in their home. In today's reading, Jesus offers the *Lord's Prayer* to the disciples who ask how to pray after observing the richness of Jesus' prayer life. Jesus echoes Hosea's description of God as a loving parent by addressing God as Father. Two short parables follow to emphasize the trustworthy character of the One to whom we pray. The parables are to be understood in the context of middle eastern hospitality. The thought of a neighbor not lending a loaf of bread for one's guest or a parent giving a stone instead of bread to a child is unthinkable. Listen now to God's Holy Word.

Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." ² So Jesus said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, may your name be revered as holy. May your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. ⁴ And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial." ⁵ And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, ⁶ for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' ⁷ And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' ⁸ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything out of friendship, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs. ⁹ 'So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ¹¹ Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? ¹² Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? ¹³ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask!' Amen.

The title of the sermon: “As One Who Lifts Infants”

The text: I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them. Hosea 11:4b

Let us pray: Holy and Loving God, when we consider the many ways you nurture and provide for us, we are grateful for your generosity. As we reflect together on who you are, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our strength and redeemer. Amen.

Every time I read Hosea 11, the image of a sculpture entitled “Reliance” by Leon Bronstein comes to my mind. I first saw it in Clayton, Missouri in 2000 when I was spending a lot of time bending and lifting our five-year old son Paul. It is a tall, bronze figure, with very straight, strong legs bending over in an act of amazing flexibility and holding on to another very small bronze figure. Both the rigidity of the legs and the flexibility of the upper body make it possible to bend down and to lift the smaller figure. To be reliable is a quality of character that is not possible unless one is both strong with a solid foundation and flexible with the ability to bend, to look at life from another point of view and to have the elasticity of spirit to be stretched. In fact, it is precisely one’s inner strength and solid foundation that makes it possible to bend, and therefore to be reliable...trustworthy, steadfast, unflinching, and faithful. Hosea tells us this is a characteristic of Yahweh God.

When Israel was a child, I loved him, it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them.

There are few scenes of tenderness in the Bible that can compare to God as One who lifts infants.

Last fall I was reunited with a friend from Webster Groves for a wedding at which I officiated. Mittie Bond, a delightful and generous mother of three has since moved to Louisiana. I asked her if she still had the artwork which I admired in her Webster home, and she did. Strategically placed on her kitchen wall was a large, colorful piece of artwork with the words “A mother never, ever gives up.” My friends, this is the message in the eleventh chapter of Hosea and Luke. This is what our God is like: a mother... a father who never, ever gives up... ...who cannot forget the years of bending down and lifting even when many years have passed.

Hosea was a prophet who understood the joy and the agony of parenting. Hosea believed that the most difficult “bending” parents would be asked to do comes later when their children, in the process of growing up and coming into their own, make choices or experience hardships that cause them and those who love them to suffer. Hosea understood that even reliable parents, who never give up and who provide discipline and boundaries for their children, suffer when their children suffer.

It is part of being a parent and by using the metaphor of parenting for Yahweh’s relationship to Israel, we are given a rare glimpse into the suffering heart of God. The suffering God of Hosea anticipates the suffering Christ of Gethsemane and of Calvary’s cross, a God who would

give up God's own self rather than give up on us; a steadfast and unfailing God, who gathers the community together and who reaches out with generous and open hands.

The God who created the world, the God who is beyond our understanding is the God who lifts infants and the God who opens the door in the middle of the night when the neighbor knocks. This is the God who listens to and answers our prayers and who never gives up on us.

Perhaps the most important thing Jesus taught about prayer was through example. Luke wants us to know that Jesus spent regular and consistent time in prayer. So much so that one of his disciples asked. *Lord, teach us to pray.* Jesus welcomed the gift of silence and reflection in his life, and he spent time alone seeking the will of his Maker, whom he called Father. Prayer strengthened and empowered Jesus for the challenges of each day. Prayer made him more attuned to the needs of others, our shared humanity, and his own limitations.

Bending and lifting are also a part of prayer. Bending down to kneel in reverence (whether we pray literally on our knees or bow our spirits) is an act of humility and contrition. Lifting those dear to us (both stranger and friend) in prayer is an act of love. When we pray, we acknowledge that we belong to community, and we affirm our faith in a reliable and loving God.

When Jesus' disciples asked him about prayer, he offered a simple prayer which reflected his understanding of who God is and all God wants to give us. Then he shared two parables to remind us that God wants nothing but the best for us and that God will be faithful not because of anything we do but because of who God is.

In Jesus' time and culture, it would be unthinkable that a request for bread to serve a guest in the middle of the night would be denied. We are told even the inhospitable neighbor will eventually respond, not so much because of persistence as the NRSV translated but to *avoid the shame* that would accompany the refusal in this middle eastern culture that places so much value on hospitality. If even an insensitive neighbor will respond to avoid shame, how much more will the God of hospitality gladly give us? In the same way, what parent would deny nourishment or threaten the well-being of their child and give a snake when he asks for a fish or a stone instead of bread?

No, Jesus' advice on prayer is simply this. Ask and you shall receive, seek and you shall find, knock and the door will be opened! Be diligent and persistent in spending time with your Maker! Hosea and Luke were right. We have a God like none other. We have a God who provides for the poor, who seeks justice and loves kindness. We have a God who lovingly leads with bands of compassion. God's ability to nourish, to be faithful, and to forgive is beyond the measure of our mind and we are invited to be a part of God's generosity—in the giving and receiving within our lives.

By the grace of the One who lifts infants, and through the gift of prayer; may we discover the strength and flexibility within ourselves that makes it possible to bend, to stretch, to reach beyond ourselves and to become as reliable to one another as God is to us. Amen.