

Season After Pentecost

Hosea

Narrative Lectionary Year 2, Week 10

November 15, 2015

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings Mark10: 13-14; Hosea 11: 1-9

Grace and peace to you from God - Father, Son, Holy Spirit –Amen

For more than 100 years The Crossnore School in the Blue Ridge Mountains has provided a Christian sanctuary of hope and healing for children in need from North Carolina. It started as a boarding school for disadvantaged mountain children to live and learn. It now provides residential foster care for 85 children from all over North Carolina, ranging from ages 1 to 21 with a special focus on keeping sibling groups together. Children live in a home-like setting with cottage parents and attend a state-of-the-art public charter-school located right there on the beautiful 85-acre haven. To further provide what the children need to heal, live and thrive, there are on-site medical care, trauma-based therapeutic services and a wide variety of extracurricular and enrichment activities.

My friend Ann and I stumbled on it as we were touring the area last week, looking for a particular weaving studio and gallery. It turned out to be on the Crossnore campus, helping to financially support the school's ministry. Up a hill, in the Crossnore chapel was a fresco by the Master artist Ben F. Long, IV, another site we had been seeking. It was entitled ""Suffer the Little Children," based the scene in St. Mark's in which Jesus tells his disciples ,*"Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs."* The executive director of Crossnore School dreamed of transforming the dark, wormy chestnut walls of the campus chapel with a Long fresco. She knew that dream needed to be realized when she held a child in her lap at a weekly chapel service and listened to the little girl tell her, "I don't have anybody who loves me. Even my cat ran away." The director wished she could point to a picture of Jesus with children right there and say to the child, "He loves you. You are never alone. Jesus will never leave you." The fresco was completed in 2006, featuring the faces of the school children and local residence. One of the things I noticed was the variety of reactions of the children to Jesus in the fresco. There were those who easily moved into Jesus arms, but others who seem tentative, a few who seem skeptical or dismissive and one who stares out of the picture to

follow you wherever you walk in the room. They are children who have known hurt, crave love and wish for a forever home where they are safe and wanted.

How tender is that relationship between child and parent? It's a powerful and intimate relationship that has the potential for great joy and profound pain because, with hearts bared and open, we are vulnerable to both deep delight and devastating hurt. While Long's picture brings our eyes to children hurt by their parent's choices, the prophet Hosea paints quite a different picture. Through Hosea, the LORD, speaks to the people of the Northern Kingdom of Israel as a parent suffering the rejection of her children. It's a poignant scene of a parent grieving a child who seems to have walked away from that relationship without a thought or care of its impact on his parent. There seems to be nothing the parent can do to change the situation. All reason says it's time to give up, stop wishing for what can't be, write him or her out of the will and get on with life without that child. It's a powerful and aching moment in a battered relationship. Some of you may have been there with one of your children. Some of you may have been that child for your parents.

What we need to hear today through Hosea is the depth of God's love and the depth of God's suffering when we shut God out of our everyday lives, when we go and we do whatever we want without giving God a moment's thought. It is not just about the collective tribes of Israel being "bad" or making God "mad." We are over hearing God speak about OUR relationship with the Lord. The prophet is pushing us to consider what kind of child of God we are and how we treat our heavenly parent. It's heart's shaking stuff IF we listen. Close your eyes and listen to God speak through Hosea:

"Israel — fill in your name ---- I've loved you since you were a child. I've loved you since you were born. I always wanted you, even before I could hold you and look into your beautiful eyes and count your fingers and toes. I called you my beloved child and it delighted you. When did you stop listening for my call? Why did you decide to turn the other way rather than include me in your life? I know every child needs to exert independence but does that mean throwing me away?"

"Oh my dear one. I loved to pick you up out of your crib and hold you against my cheek. I was there helping you to learn to walk, one halting step at a time, into my open arms. I was there to bandage and kiss the scraped knees, to wash your face after you got sick, and hold you when you were scared. I lifted you up and you felt safe and knew you

could make it. I fed, clothed, housed and educated you. I made sure you had what you needed. And I loved doing it. I loved watching you grow and becoming the gifted person you were created to be. Then, a time came when you turned away from me. You chose to reject what was right and good for what was foolish, fleeting and destructive. When the trouble caught up with you, you turned up and I'd help. But soon you were off again, and I was nothing to you. That's been the way for years now. I just can't do it anymore. Nothing changes. It's time to let you live as you choose and live with the consequences. Those other gods will not bring you life but you don't hear me. I'm done, my dear one."

It's heart breaking to hear God grieve our sin, our rejection. It's frightening to think God would finally just give up on us. Yet God's pain or anger doesn't stop our rebellious, self-righteousness, "I-know-better-than-anyone" ways. Will God's grace? The prophet Hosea reports what we will hear again from Jesus. God says, "How can I give you up, my beloved child? How can I just hand you over to your demons? "My heart recoils at the thought. The compassion I try to turn off, grows warm and tender again. I cannot stop you from running but I can't stop loving you. I cannot support your sin, or prevent the consequences but I will not abandon you. I will love you — maybe not as you wish, but I will love you and stand with you and maybe you will remember what love was created to be ----- generous, mutual and full of life-giving possibilities."

The children at Crossnore School get another chance to be valued, nurtured and loved. They can get what they need to heal and prosper beyond the pain imposed by their parents. Children of God, we get chance after chance to return to the Lord who treasures, cares and loves us. God will provide what we need to heal and prosper beyond the pain we impose on ourselves, on others and on our heavenly parent and Lord. Will you, will I run away from God when we leave here today or walk with the Lord in how we conduct our daily lives and relationships? It's the question children of God ask themselves each day, each decision, each choice. Turn away or turn toward our Lord? Bring delight or heartache? There is no doubt for which choice God hopes, for our sake and sake of the world. Choose life. Choose life with God. It's not only our calling, it's the path of freedom, meaning, gratitude and peace.

Linda M Alessandri 11/14/15