

Bands of Love and Invisible Strings

The Rev. Robert J. Crosby-Shearer, EC + July 31, 2022 + Cordova Bay United + Hosea 11: 1-11 and Luke 12: 13-21

Let us pray:

God, open our hearts do your deep grace.
In our shaking and stumbling, hold us in your compassionate love
Even as you call us to freedom, joy and peace in you.
And may the words of my mouth...

...Our gospel story, today begins with someone in the crowd, perhaps seeing Jesus' works of power, and recognizing Jesus' spiritual wisdom - asking him to mediate a family dispute: "Jesus, Tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me".

The story is familiar to many of us. Most of us who've had to deal with family affairs of one kind or another - know how this can happen... That outdated will. The sense, right or wrong, that someone got more than they should have...

But without missing a beat, Jesus insists this kind of arbitration isn't his role. Instead, He looks beyond the question and deeply into the person's heart - into his intention behind the question: "Watch out for greed - and don't let material things possess you." Jesus says.

And then, as He so often does, Jesus moves into story-telling- into a parable, to underline just what he's getting at.

He tells this metaphorical story, perhaps overstated (as so many of the parables are); it's a caricature of a person who has an excess of money wants to keep all his possessions for himself. This person decides to build bigger barns to protect his wealth - and to give himself ease and security for the days to come.

In the story, God, harshly, calls this rich character a fool - and directs him toward higher things - what if your life was taken tonight? A *fool*. That word fool indeed sounds harsh to us - and I suppose that is the intent.

For the Hebrew listener, the 1 word fool, *nabal (na-val)* in Hebrew, comes from an ancient story of the Hebrew people. Back in 1st Samuel, a rich landowner, Nabal, clings to his possessions when asked to share food with some servants who have been wandering in the wilderness and are in need. Nabal refuses - and in Hebrew, 'fool', naval, becomes eternally linked to his name. In Hebrew this word has connotations of being a soul-less, hollow person. I can't help but wonder if there isn't a cue in Jesus' use of that word, pointing back to Nabal, who, similarly, to the rich man in the parable, has more than enough, but won't share his wealth with those around him in need.

In Jesus' story, the rich man says to himself: 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' That word that's translated as 'soul' is the Greek work *psyche* - which is often translated as life - it's as if to say "hey, life - you're set - you've got security, you've got stuff - so now you can settle into the good times...."

But the implication is that he, and by extension, that we - can't live that way.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, one of the precursors of our United Church, claimed that the Bible knows nothing of solitary religion. Likewise, Jesus knows that

there are enough resources for all – but not if some have more than others and keep it stored away for themselves.

And so it is that, in this story, the solitary self-made man is knocked off his greedy pedestal; for he has gained the world but lost the essence of life itself; he's become 'na-val' - that is, guilty of holding greed over love, putting security before risk - and choosing to have riches rather than life abundant. He's lost his soul. And in doing so, he is depriving others of their right to have the basics – to have just enough.

Yes, it's as if Jesus is saying we can cling to stuff, or we can die to it – and in the death to it comes [the] true resurrection life.... (Capon) *[pause]*

I've sometimes heard people say that they're more into the "new testament God" – than the so-called "old testament" one. But our sacred tradition would hold that this is not a separate God; that the God of Sarah and Abraham, or Rachel and Jacob is the God made flesh and whose very heart is revealed in Jesus.

It's also popular for theologians these days to suggest that we Christians need to read who God is through the lens of the incarnation, life death and resurrection of Jesus. As a Jesus-follower, I think that's deeply true.

But this week, where Jesus is the one who challenges us around our intentions and actions, with hard words, like 'fool' - I think it's actually the ancient Hebrew prophet Hosea who gives us a lens into the very *nature* of our God of mercy, grace, forgiveness and compassion.

Oh how I love that non-gendered parental image in the ancient Hebrew prophet Hosea!

Notice the sweet, sweet images of God in the face of the persistent inability of the child to obey; as God takes up God's people into God's arms, heals them – and I love this language -God "*leads them with cords of kindness and bands of love – lifting an infant to their cheek*"

The context of this story is one where God's people have strayed – they are violent and idolatrous – their swords rage and their religion is oppressive – but, as the scripture says "I, God, will *not* execute fierce anger" – instead God's compassion grows warm and tender.

In Hebrew, there's this beautiful word, and Hosea uses it throughout his prophetic book – it's the Hebrew word *Hesed* – which is an unwavering faithful love. It's the ideal love of a deep lover, it's romantic. It's the love of a perfect parent....

But don't get me wrong – this is not a sappy or saccharine love. Like Aslan, in the great Narnia series, this is a God who roars – who roars like a woman whose children are in peril calling them into health and wholeness – or, from the same root word, into holiness.

There's this beautiful children's story that we used to read to our kids. It's called *the invisible string*, and in it there are a set of twins who wake up, scared, in a storm. Their mother encourages them to go back to sleep, but they want an assurance that she's with them. She tells them of an invisible string that goes from their heart to hers. They ask the mother questions: If we go far away will that string still be there? What if we do

things that you dislike, or hurt you, or even hurt each other. The mother assures them that that invisible string is, indeed, unconditional.

I love that image of the invisible string – those ‘bands of love’ – and we might call that agape, hesed - or mercy, or grace.

My sense is that we are a people all too “prone to wander”, as our hymn we sang earlier, suggests. That’s true both collectively, as in the ancient people Hosea is addressing, and individually - as it is in Jesus’ story of the rich fool. I, for one know that that foolish greed, that need for ease and security too often overcomes my care for God and others.

And I don’t think we need to look too far beyond the headlines to see that that same disease permeates our society, our world as a whole.

One commentator on our Jesus parable today says this: “wealthy, poor, or in-between – we are - all of us, in Jesus’ eyes, nothing but unrepentant rich people... We clutch at our lives rather than open our hands to our deaths. And as long as we do that, the real life that comes only by resurrection remains permanently out of reach” (Capon)

And yet, in spite of that, morning by morning our scandalous prodigal God brings new mercies into our lives, if our hearts are merely open to receiving them. Which might be the hardest task of all – how hard it is to really accept that mercy and love.

Yes, fellow pilgrims, we are certainly called to the work of deep surrender, to be rich toward God – to let go of the deepest greed within us, and to open our whole beings; our pocketbooks, our hearts to each other and to God.

But the reality is that we will stumble and fail. We will inevitably be fools - and the beauty of the nature of God is that when we do, we have this amazing lover, parent, this great catcher who holds us, catches our falls - and roars across the universe to love, hold and guide us into freedom - and, in doing so, to be rich in God. In this, God takes away even our need to strive for perfection – for we live in God’s economy of Hesed love, of grace.

This is a God gracefully ‘bends down and takes us in Her arms’ as Hosea says. This is the God, who, in Jesus became as us, and instead of choosing power-over, chose downward mobility with arms of love stretched on a cross and conquered the forces of greed once and for all in resurrection power.

It’s good news for us this morning in this time of transition and change... for the church as a whole and in the weary wider world – God’s love holds us warm and tender – God roars for us - that invisible string binds us – and calls us, too, to live in grace into Jesus’ resurrection freedom.

Guide us O Great Redeemer - with your cords of kindness and bands of Love.
For we need it now. *Amen.*