

Ordinary

July 11

Amos 7:7-17; Psalm 82; Colossians 1:1-14;
Luke 10:25-37

As of this writing, the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico is entering its third month with no end in sight. The estimates of the amount of oil gushing out seemingly grow bigger each day. Some people are busy pointing fingers, usually at the people or groups they already didn't like, but the rest of us are left sitting here, feeling completely helpless. "How could this have happened?"

The people of Israel during the time of the exile asked similar questions. How did this happen? Aren't we the chosen people? Has God abandoned us? A cursory reading of prophets like Amos might answer "yes" to this last question. In the modern era we've come to see a prophet as something like a fortune teller looking into a crystal ball, and we read the Old Testament prophets as looking into the future and seeing an angry God "remove his curtain of protection" to let Israel's enemies overrun them as punishment for sin.

The thing is, though, that that's not really how people in the ancient world viewed a prophet. Prophets are people who are gifted with very clear sight and are able to call things as they are, not as the arbiters of the status quo wish them to be. There's anger in the words God attributes to Amos, to be sure. But there's also a lot of sadness and disappointment. Amos is telling them what is going to happen if they keep going down the path they're on. They act like all the other nations around them, looking out only for their own interests and not caring for those in need, so they end up as vulnerable as any other nation to being

overrun by a more aggressive foe. They can ask "how could this have happened?", but it's not like they weren't warned.

In our own day, we have to process our own frustrations over this ecological disaster in light of the fact that we, too, were warned. People who stood on the margins of mainstream thought warned us that our reckless practices and unchecked consumption would have a negative impact on the earth. And like the prophets of old, they were dismissed as crazy. We can't say we weren't warned.

In this week's gospel reading, Jesus tells a story about what it is to be a true neighbor and how it transcends racial, cultural, and geographic boundaries. A true neighbor helps out someone who is in need regardless of who they are. What if we took that idea a step further and considered that a true neighbor also considers how their actions might affect others and takes steps to make sure others aren't negatively impacted by what they do? What if being a good neighbor meant that we as a society considered the long term impact of how we procure and use the earth's resources? To be a good neighbor to those who share our oceans, our skies, and even those who will inhabit our lands long after we are gone, we might have to change our ways so more of the dire predictions of modern-day prophets don't come true.

What if being a good neighbor meant that we as a society considered the long term impact of how we procure and use the earth's resources?

July 18

Amos 8:1-12; Psalm 52; Colossians 1:15-28;
Luke 10:38-42

The two New Testament readings for this week present highly contrasting pictures of Jesus. In the passage from Colossians, Paul is writing very poetically about the cosmic Christ, the firstborn of all creation who became incarnate in human flesh and demonstrates God's ultimate victory over the powers of sin, death, and evil. The majesty and grandeur of his prose makes me think of Handel's "Messiah." The passage from Luke's gospel, on the other hand, shows us the very warm, intimate, human Jesus. He commends Mary for choosing to sit at his feet and listen to him rather than joining her sister, Martha, in the kitchen. The background music to this passage wouldn't be a full orchestra and a hundred member chorus, it would be an acoustic guitar around a crackling campfire.

The early church wrestled with how to understand this divine-human tension. We know that they struggled with how to deal with gnosticism, an early heresy that claimed that Jesus was not really human, just a spirit inhabiting a human shell. We read the early church fathers pondering these issues as well. It all came to a head in the fourth century when the first Ecumenical Council met at Nicea to deal with the fight between the followers of two brilliant thinkers named Arius and Athanasius. Athanasius won the day, and the thinkers at Nicea and subsequent councils stated that Jesus Christ is at once fully divine and fully human, both natures existing in harmony with one another.

We've come to realize that we need both these pictures of Jesus because Jesus shows us who God is. And since our concepts of God are way too small (that's what idolatry is all about), we need a plethora of images—ones that sometimes even exist in tension with one another—so that we are continually reminded of the vastness of God.

If we need a variety of images of the person who shows us who God is, then we also need a variety of ways of understanding the texts that tell us who God is. The Bible is a book of poetic reflections on the transcendence of God, a book of stories about the loving, intimate parent God, a book of uncompromising holiness, a book of social justice, a book that warns of a coming judgment, and a book of unending grace. The Bible is all of these things and more because God is all of these things and more. We have an unending variety of ways of understanding God because we'll never arrive at a point where we totally comprehend God. If we did, then we would be God. Thankfully, God never lets us get settled at that point. So let's celebrate these beautiful tensions that the Bible gives us, because they point us to something larger than themselves. They point us to God!

July 25

Hosea 1:2-10; Psalm 85; Colossians
2:6-15, (16-19); Luke 11:1-13

Hosea married a prostitute. Let's ponder that for a moment. Hosea *married* a prostitute! He married a woman who made no pretensions about being faithful to him. He entered into a sacred and holy covenant with a person he knew would make a mockery of it. Hosea didn't do this because he was dumb or self-deluded. He did it as a sign of how Israel treated their covenant with God. Hosea was many things, but subtle was not one of them.

This highly negative portrayal of how Israel (and by extension, all humanity) treated its covenant with God contrasts strongly with how the Psalmist speaks lovingly of God's faithfulness. Too often we get caught up in the idea that God is wrathful in the Old Testament and gracious in the New Testament. But a closer reading of darn near every Old Testament story shows God's anger being tempered and even overcome by God's love and mercy. And don't forget how God smote Ananias and Sapphira, and King Herod in the Book

of Acts! The New Testament isn't all sunshine and roses either!

Perhaps we find the need to put things into these "either/or" categories because it's easier to wrap our minds around. If we can just assign one trait or general set of traits to God, if we think that we can boil discipleship down to an easy-to-memorize set of actions, then following Jesus is just one activity among others: I play golf on Saturday, I follow Jesus for an hour on Sunday.

A covenant is much more than a contract. A contract has to be detailed so that if an issue comes up, and objective judgment can be made as to whether or not the terms of the contract have been honored. A covenant isn't like that. A covenant might contain fewer words, but it goes much deeper than a legally binding set of agreements. A covenant defines the parameters of a relationship in which the parties are completely committed to one another. So perhaps Hosea's very drastic actions are somewhat justified considering he is speaking on behalf of the God who has remained faithful to us while we have betrayed the covenant over and over again.

As much frustration as Hosea expresses God as having, though, God still doesn't walk away. Jesus comes on the scene to remind us of God's faithfulness, expressing it in terms of a dear friend or a loving parent. People in those covenants don't deny the other what they need, and neither does God.

August 1

Hosea 11:1-11; Psalm 107:1-9, 43;
Colossians 3:1-11, Luke 12:13-21

I've always kind of felt bad for the guy in the parable Jesus tells in Luke 12. After all, the guy had an abundance of crops, why shouldn't he be able to store them and sell them? If he made more money, that way he would be able to give more to the poor, right?

My reaction to this parable tells me more about me than it does about the story itself. I live in the wealthiest country in the world, and I had

a fairly privileged upbringing. I grew up around people who worked very hard for what they had, and many of them resented attempts (whether real or perceived) by others to take what they had earned.

But as hard as someone can work, none of us gets what we have all on our own. We had people who protected and raised us when we were children. We had people who educated us and helped us learn the necessary skills to make it in the world. Even the farmer in Jesus' parable didn't do it all on his own. He wouldn't have gotten his great harvest without the sun and the rain to help the crops grow, or without the employees to help cultivate the ground and harvest the crop. Everything we have is the result of a group effort, whether we realize it or not.

Think of the alternate, positive ending Jesus could have told to this story. Instead of hoarding all his earnings and planning on having a quiet, lazy life, imagine the farmer had decided to pay bonuses to his workers. What if he had started handing out the extra to the people in town who didn't have enough to eat, or he used all the extra money to build a school? When he died that night, he wouldn't be the guy who died with the most toys. He'd be the guy who was so loved that his funeral would be over capacity because he was generous. Instead he left all his earthly treasures behind and had nothing to show for it.

If this farmer had the benefit of Paul's exhortation from Colossians 3, he might have recognized that his greed (which Paul rightly identifies as idolatry) was getting the better of him, and he might have focused instead on using this abundance in ways that would glorify God and not try to keep the reward for himself. Now *that* would have been a story with a happy ending!

August 8

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20; Psalm 50:1-8, 22-23;
Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40

Sometimes when I read the lectionary texts together I scratch my head. "Why did someone

put these two texts together?” I ask. “These two texts seem to be saying the exact opposite things!” The idea of different biblical authors disagreeing with one another doesn’t bother me. In fact, I find it very refreshing, because the Bible was written over several centuries by people in a variety of different locations and contexts, so they’re not all going to experience God in the same way. But to put two passages together as Sunday readings that seem to be saying vastly different things? That’ll just confuse people. It’s a bad idea!

Then again, maybe it’s brilliant. So often we get complacent with biblical texts, especially if we’ve heard one or more of them before, so we stop listening, only to have them surprise us again. Take this week’s two Old Testament readings. First we see Isaiah being highly critical of the sacrificial system in Solomon’s Temple during the late monarchy. God is tired of the sacrifices that occur while the people ignore the commandments about justice and mercy. Then we read the Psalmist saying that God won’t rebuke the people for their sacrifices. We just read Isaiah doing that (even though the former text was written a lot later)!

And yet, there’s a kind of harmony beneath the tension on the surface of these two passages. Later on in the very same Psalm the writer says that “those who bring thanksgiving as their sacrifice” honor God, and encourages people to worship God with the hearts, not just with particular rituals. Perhaps Isaiah’s rant is the flip side of that same coin, showing how God is fed up with the people going through the motions but not letting their hearts be changed. Maybe whether God is happy with our acts of worship depends on who we are outside of our formal times of worship.

Jesus talks about something similar in this week’s passage from Luke. He disabuses his hearers of the notion that there might be one magic thing we can do (make an offering, pray a prayer, etc.) to mark off some kind of spiritual checklist and then move on with our lives. Instead he says that we always need to be on the watch for when

God is going to do something. We’re supposed to orient our whole lives to being laborers for the Kingdom of God, confronting evil and injustice, helping those who unable to help themselves, and proclaiming God’s goodness and mercy with our every action. We don’t do more because we think we have to, but because we get to. This is the kind of sacrifice God is looking for.

 August 15

Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:1-2, 8-19;
Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:49-56

I don’t often listen to Christian radio. It’s not really my cup of tea, but I flip by it occasionally when I’m driving around. One Christian station where I live has the slogan “Safe for the Whole Family.” Often they read Bible verses on the air, but I have yet to hear this week’s gospel read on the “family-friendly” Christian station. I wonder why.

This passage doesn’t sound like our typical picture of Jesus. We usually think of Jesus as the guy who remains gracious no matter what, even praying for forgiveness for his murderers. But here we see Jesus showing another side of himself. It seems like he’s frustrated. Maybe it’s because he’s been telling these people about what God really values and they keep getting distracted by stupid stuff. Maybe he’s just had it with the professional religious people always trying to trap him with their questions.

Whatever the reason, he’s really letting his audience have it. This rant may not fit in with our typical picture of Jesus, but it’s hardly without biblical precedent. Isaiah reflects similar themes of frustration in chapter 5. The opening sentence about “my beloved” throws us off at first (sounding a bit like the Song of Solomon), and it sharply contrasts with what comes after it. The vineyard on the very fertile hill didn’t grow good grapes, even though the one who tended it did everything by the book. They’re so frustrated they feel

like quitting.

We can all identify with that, right? Maybe we've never planted a vineyard, but we've all done things that take a lot of hard work, and sometimes they just don't work out, seemingly for no reason at all. Sometimes we get so frustrated that we just want to knock everything down or throw something against the wall. But if we give in and do it, we almost immediately regret it. Strong frustration is extremely powerful, but it only lasts for a short time.

Perhaps these passages are meant to show us that there is nowhere we can go, emotionally or otherwise, that God has not already been. God doesn't look down on us when we get angry and frustrated. God knows what it's like! These deep, dark emotional places can be very lonely, and the Bible shows us that God is right there with us, just waiting to lead us through and into better days.

A ugust 22

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6;
Hebrews 12:18-29; Luke 13:10-17

I read a book a while back about how younger generations perceive Christianity and why, and what I read was not encouraging. Among the many reasons churches are failing to reach young people is that they are perceived as inaccessible, overly formal, and fake. As much as that criticism stings, there is a lot of truth to it. We hide behind things like rigid formality or big, splashy programs, and we end up projecting this image that we've got it all together. Maybe we don't mean to do this, at least consciously. We want to put our best foot forward if we want to reach new people, right?

Whether or not our intentions are good doesn't really matter all that much in the end. If we're coming off as fake, then we're doing people we're trying to reach a disservice, to say nothing of how we're selling God short. Maybe one of the reasons people were so drawn to Jesus is that he was a breath of fresh air. Maybe

they were attracted to the fact that he cared more about people than he did about arbitrarily following a set of rules, like when he healed the woman on the Sabbath.

That's not to say, though, that Jesus was "spiritual and not religious." That's a phrase that gets tossed around a lot today. It implies that religion is somehow bad, and that spirituality is the good stuff that needs to be freed from the constraints of organized religion. But where do we get our ideas about spirituality? From organized religion, of course. Organized religion is the mechanism by which we pass down ideas and traditions from generation to generation. Without religion, we wouldn't have any kind of spirituality to speak of.

Jesus was a person who took religion very seriously. He often came into conflict with other religious people who practiced religion in ways that were often self serving. Too often formal religious structures create barriers to keep people out. Jesus sought to knock down these barriers, but not the religious systems themselves. The writer of Hebrews writes beautifully about an otherworldly scene, but it's not one that's far off and inaccessible. It's inviting others in as they are. "Acceptable reverence and awe" is part of the picture, but such reverence is our response to the invitation, not the thing that earns our way in. Maybe we need to rethink what it is to be religious so that younger generations don't get such a bad taste in their mouth when they think about religion.

A ugust 29

Jeremiah 2:4-13; Psalm 81:1, 10-16;
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14

Immigration has been a hot-button issue for some time. Every now and then a President or other ambitious leader tries to tackle the problem and usually winds up running into a buzz saw. So many people get so passionate about this issue that they fail to see that people with differing conclusions often care about the same

things they do, but go about dealing with them in a different way.

Amid all the sound-bites and buzzwords, the biblical concept of hospitality seems to have been forgotten. In the ancient world, particularly in the lands described in the Bible, hospitality was a life and death issue. You could wander through the wilderness for days and not encounter anybody, and your provisions could easily run out. If you happened to run into someone who had a need that you could meet, refusing to do so might be as good as killing them with your bare hands.

As human society grew and changed, people largely settled down and there were fewer nomads. People began to congregate in cities where there was more protection and greater access to the basic necessities of life, at least in theory. Even in the cities, there was and is not equal access, and there are always those that teeter right on the edge of life and death, just as if they were nomads out in the wilderness. The only difference is that in the city it becomes much easier to convince ourselves that there are not people in need of hospitality, because it's harder to pick them out of the crowd.

Undocumented migrant workers occupy the lowest place in our society.

And it is to those in the lowest place that Jesus commands us to give the best seat when we throw a banquet.

Undocumented migrant workers often live right on that edge in our society. Their immigration status makes it almost impossible to demand minimum wages and basic safety protections. Regardless of what we think should be done about the immigration problem, we need to recognize that these brothers and sisters occupy the "lowest place" reserved for the most expendable people in our soci-

ety. And it is to those in the lowest place that Jesus commands us to give the best seat when we throw a banquet. Doing so is not a political statement, but an acknowledgement of their basic human worth, no matter what their social, economic, racial, or immigration status.

September 5

Jeremiah 18:1-11; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18;
Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33

Very close to one of our annual conference's retreat centers lives a man who runs a pottery shop out of his home. His store is on his front porch, and on warm days you can walk right up and see him working on his pottery wheel. He's an extremely gifted artist, so he makes it look easy, but if you look very closely you can see the intensity and concentration on his face as he shapes thick lumps of clay into beautiful creations.

One time I was sitting there with him, watching him work, and he was grunting at a particular lump of clay. "It's got a really big knot in it," he said, "and it's fighting me. It would be so much easier if it would just trust me and let me shape it." This man's father was a beloved Methodist preacher, and he knows the Bible pretty well, so I'm pretty sure the only reason he didn't start quoting this passage from Jeremiah to me right then is that he's too humble to compare himself to God and the clay to us. So I'll do it for him.

The Psalmist reflects on the same theme, saying how God formed us from the very beginning inside our mother's womb. I think God had an easier time forming us there because we just kind of let it happen. But after we are born and we become self-aware, we start trying to go our own way. I have a daughter who is currently only around 18 months old, but some of the "terrible-twos" are starting to show already. She's very strong willed (just like her dad), and she often gets upset when we won't let her do something she wants to do, even if that thing is harmful to her.

We basically do the same thing to God. We get ideas in our head about the best way to go, and we

ignore or reject anything that suggests otherwise. We're like lumpy clay that just won't cooperate in the potter's hands, so sometimes God has to grunt and struggle with us to mold us so that we can reach our full potential.

This week's gospel lesson contains some of the hardest things Jesus has to say. These are things that we, as lumpy clay, chafe and squirm against with all our might because we don't want to deny everything we want. We don't want to have a higher priority than our family, our career, success, and comfort. And we sure don't want to pick up a cross and follow Jesus to the place that he ended up! And maybe we won't have to, but we won't know until we let God work out the lumps and just trust that the potter knows what he's doing.

September 12

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28; Psalm 14,
1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10

This week's gospel passage is a pretty familiar one, and familiarity sometimes robs a passage of its ability to shock us. So let's pretend for a moment that we don't realize that there is a spiritual dimension to the parable Jesus tells. Let's treat it like it's a real, practical question about animal husbandry.

"Which one of you doesn't leave the entire heard to find the one that wandered off?" Well, actually, none of us would do that. It could have been picked off by a predator that's still hungry, to say nothing of the other sheep who could wander off and get eaten. Jesus, are you really suggesting putting our entire flock at risk for one sheep? There is such a thing as acceptable losses!

Jesus' parable shows us that God's economy is radically different than the world's economy. If you leave the entire heard of sheep to go after the one, you risk losing the whole flock, and with it, your livelihood. Abandoning the one that ran off is a question of cost-benefit analysis. Compassion doesn't enter into the equation. That's the harsh reality of the world's economy. But God doesn't operate that way. God is willing to take risks because no sheep is too unimportant. In God's economy, the needs of the many and the needs of one are never incompatible.

Paul is further proof that God's economy is radically different than that of this world. God doesn't look at resumes when choosing whom to use. Paul didn't exactly have a track record of gentleness or friendliness to anyone, let alone Christians or Gentiles. But he was the one God used to spread the Gospel all over the Roman world. Of Jesus' disciples, the only one with any discernible leadership skills was Judas, and look what he did. Instead it's the impulsive, act-first-think-second Peter that is called to lead the movement after Jesus is gone.

In our own churches we often operate by the world's economic standards. We give the power positions to people with wealth and influence because we want them to keep giving. We won't take big risks by serving and letting in people who might upset the delicate balance we've created for fear of offending the wrong people. Who leaves the ninety-nine sheep to go look for the one? The world doesn't, but God does. So who are we going to be more like?



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