

28 August 2016

The Harlot
Ezekiel 16

In both testaments, God is described above all as a father, who has taken us in and adopted us, simply out of love. We read from Romans 8, verses 12-17:

So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ – if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

In the Old Testament, the metaphor of adoption is a little more graphic – at least in the prophet Ezekiel’s hands. We read the beginning of Ezekiel’s long parable found in chapter 16:

The word of the Lord came to me: Mortal, make known to Jerusalem her abominations, and say, Thus says the Lord God to Jerusalem: Your origin and your birth were in the land of the Canaanites; your father was an Amorite, and your mother a Hittite. As for your birth, on the day you were born your navel cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water to cleanse you, nor rubbed with salt, nor wrapped in cloths. No eye pitied you, to do any of these things for you out of compassion for you; but you were thrown out in the open field, for you were abhorred on the day you were born.

I passed by you, and saw you flailing about in your blood. As you lay in your blood, I said to you, ‘Live! and grow up like a plant of the field.’ You grew up and became tall and arrived at full womanhood; your breasts were formed, and your hair had grown; yet you were naked and bare.

I passed by you again and looked on you; you were at the age for love. I spread the edge of my cloak over you, and covered your nakedness: I pledged myself to you and entered into a covenant with you, says the Lord God, and you became mine.

Last week, we heard the Old Testament story of Jonah. It’s a great story, often told and retold, and although it has a very grown-up message, it’s told simply and clearly and is suitable for all ages. We even had some fun with the story and got the kids involved in telling it. Moreover, when it gets to its message, about God’s love for all people and not just his chosen ones, it doesn’t cram that lesson down our throats but suggests it gently, asking, “Why shouldn’t God care about the Assyrians just as much as the Israelites? They’re all God’s children, aren’t they?”

Today’s Old Testament story isn’t so gentle. And not so suitable for all ages. There’s an internet acronym, NSFW, which means “Not Safe for Work.” It’s used as a warning, “This is not a website you want open on your computer when the boss walks by your cubicle.” Ezekiel 16’s kind of like that. We read the first eight verses, and that’s about as far as we can read aloud with children present, so let me carefully tell the rest. In particular, there’s one word that appears a lot, always applied to Jerusalem. It’s a blunt word, but because we are a mixed audience, I will use

the less-familiar, King James translation for that word instead of any of its more modern synonyms. That word is “harlot.”

Jerusalem, Ezekiel says, you are a mixed-race orphan, the unwanted offspring of the Hittites and the Amorites, and when you were born, no one cared. You were left in the fields to die, flailing about in your afterbirth. The only reason you even exist is because God passed by, saw you lying there helpless, and had mercy. He picked you up, washed you, took you in. You became his ward. He fed you and kept you alive until you grew into a graceful young woman. Then he had mercy on you again and clothed you in rich clothing, as a bride, and made you his own. He gave you jewels and rich food and lifted you up. Once an abandoned baby, you became a glorious queen, simply because God looked on you and loved you.

But how did you return God’s love? You became a harlot. You threw open your doors to every passer-by, and you gave yourself to every man you met. The rich bread and fruit and oil and wine that God gave you, you gave to others, using them to entice them to your bed. You built high places on the hills round about, spread out the fine fabrics God had given you, then lay down on them and offered yourself to travelers. At the head of every street, in every city square, you gave yourself to strangers, throwing away what God had given you, treating it as nothing. You gave yourself to Egyptians. You gave yourself to Babylonians. They took used you as they wanted, then laughed and went on their way. And here’s why they laughed: because while usually a harlot makes her lovers pay for her favors, you did not. Instead, you paid your lovers to use you.

So what shall God do to you? He will take back the gifts he gave you and leave you unclothed, unprotected, and bare – once again abandoned in the fields. Go to your lovers and see if they will take you in. God will withdraw his protection – as he withdrew his protection from your sister Sodom before you, and from your sister Israel. They, too, were wicked, but for all their wickedness, God will surely restore them before he restores you. They sinned against compassion and justice, but you . . . you are a harlot.

That’s the cleaned up version.

The sin of Jerusalem that this bleak prophecy describes with such loathing, the sin Ezekiel calls “harlotry,” is simply the sin of idolatry. When he talks about going up to the “high places in the hills round about,” he is talking about the shrines where the people of Judah and Jerusalem went to offer their sacrifices to various gods in exchange for some favor. That was what people imagined worship to be in the Ancient Near East: a *quid pro quo* with the gods. I give you a calf, or the first fruits of my field, and you give me what I want. There were even specific gods for specific requests. If you wanted rain for your fields, you made sacrifices to Baal, the storm God. If you wanted a good crop from your vineyard, that was the god Yayin. Dagon was for grain. Asherah was for fertility in general – for your crops, your livestock, or your family. There was even an exchange rate: the more you sacrificed to the gods, the more you could ask from them. In extreme cases – when you needed something really badly, or a very large favor – then you gave a very large sacrifice, such as one of your own children. That, it was believed, would guarantee the attention of the gods. This was what idolatry in and around Jerusalem looked like.

But I want to clarify one misconception about idolatry. Today, if asked, we would probably define idolatry as “the worship of other gods” or “worshiping any god other than the true God.” And certainly that’s a part of it. The first of the Ten Commandments says, “You shall have no other god before me.” But that’s not enough. It’s not just about which God you worship. You see, some of those “high places” that Ezekiel spoke of were dedicated to Yahweh, to Israel’s god, and Ezekiel condemned those, too. Ezekiel didn’t just condemn the high places just because the wrong gods were worshiped there, but also because there God was worshiped wrongly.

It’s this *quid pro quo* stuff. It’s approaching worship as an exchange, in which we give something to whatever god in return for which we expect some favor. It’s worship undertaken for our own benefit, in order to further some project of our own. In this kind of worship, the gods – or God – become tools that we adopt when we need them, which can then be put away in a cabinet, with the door closed, until the next time they would be useful. In this kind of worship, the worshipper is in control. He decides when to involve God, and to what extent, and for what purpose. I need a good grade on this test, I need to nail this interview, I need a raise, I need you to heal my child’s illness, I need help. And so, I will do these things for you: I will bring a bull to the high place for an offering, I will offer the first fruits of my harvest, I will attend church every Sunday, I will raise my pledge, I will tithe my income, I will serve on the Stewardship Team. All those things are good things to do, but when they are done in order to gain some benefit for ourselves, they are nothing more or less than idolatry. It’s not when we pick the wrong god to name in our worship services. It’s when we seek to control when and how and to what purpose we relate to God. It’s when we treat God as a useful asset in achieving our own goals.

Think again about Ezekiel’s parable. Why did God give Jerusalem life? Simply because he looked at her, flailing in her blood, and loved her. Why did God take her to himself as a bride? For the same reason. What did Jerusalem do to earn all her rich gifts? Nothing. They were simply gifts. But she turned to her “lovers” – that is, to other gods and other nations – and tried to buy their favor. Why would she do that, when she had already been given everything she could dream of simply out of God’s generosity? Because she wanted control. She *wanted a quid pro quo*, because then whatever she achieved would be her own doing. Then she could take credit for what she had acquired. But by seeking to be in control of her own fate, she gave up everything she had been given freely and received in exchange only shame and degradation. That’s idolatry.

When we define idolatry as “worshiping Baal,” that makes us feel good. We *never* worship Baal. But when we define idolatry as trying to be in control of our own fate without reference to God, as treating God as an adjunct to our own projects – whatever they might be – then we are idolaters. We are idolaters as individuals when we seek God’s favor or a heavenly reward by attending church or giving offerings or doing good works. We are idolaters as churches or as denominations when we set ourselves a project (which these days is invariably to add more members) and then set about that project exclusively by means of our own strategic plans, new programs, or the latest technologies and then, as an afterthought, invite God along to make our plans work. This is idolatry. And when we squander the gifts that God has already freely given us on these projects, then we are harlots.

But we avoid idolatry by remembering that the good things we have, the blessings that we enjoy, were never anything but gifts from a generous God. We have not entered into a mutually beneficial arrangement with God; we have been adopted as God's beloved children and blessed because God loves us. This is the starting point of faith, and our part is simply to be thankful and remain faithful to the one who has adopted us when we were nothing, who made us his, and who has always blessed us. Thanks be to God.