



ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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Our Poppa Who Art in Heaven

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, July 28, 2013

The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Luke 11:1-13

When I was in elementary school, I was on a playdate with one of my friends. It was at his house after school. And as I dropped my backpack down inside his front door, he held out (how hospitable!) a green pack of Wrigley's Doublemint gum and asked if I wanted a piece. My mouth watered and I said, "Sure, thanks. I'd love one." And he held the pack out to me and I took a single piece that he had conveniently stuck out of the pack. And then, Snap! Ow! The thing bit me! I threw it on the floor. My friend burst into laughter. And I just couldn't understand what was going on until I looked closely and saw that the pack of gum was actually a kind of mousetrap-like device, with this spring-loaded metal trap hidden on the underside of the stick of gum. I had fallen for my friend's trick. He got me! And after my friend stopped laughing, I looked at him—my friend who tricked me, took advantage of my trust, and laughed in delight at my pain—I looked at him with resolve and I said: "Oh my God, where can I get one of those!" We spent much of our playdate planning who would be the next mark.

I get the feeling that Jesus must have been familiar with this sort of thing. Well, not the gum trick. That was way after his time. But I bet he could have taught me a few of the classics. You can find them in our reading for today. First there's the old "hand a guy a snake, when he thinks your handing him a fish" trick. It works well because there are scales on both. This works so much better, I imagine, if you match the color of the snake to the color of the fish. And then there's the old "when your buddy asks for an egg, hand him a scorpion." Ooh. That's a great idea. You see, because they'd think, at least for a moment, that the hard shell of the scorpion was the hard shell of the egg, they'd go to make their omelet then, pow! It gets them! So devious. If only I had read the Bible more as a child, I could have discovered, literally, the oldest tricks in the Book!

But why is Jesus going on about pranks, especially after teaching his disciples how to pray? For the first time, he teaches his friends the Lord's Prayer, or "the Our Father," the prayer that begins with him addressing God as his Father, or as his Abba, in Aramaic—one of the few Aramaic words that remain in the Gospels, so we know it is important, this term of endearment for a father, striking in its informality and intimacy. 'Abba' back then is not that far from 'Poppa' for us.

When he teaches his disciples the "Our Poppa who art in heaven," he gives them an example of a prayer that you would say to your Poppa: among other things, that you would want to follow in his footsteps; that you would want his forgiveness; and you would hope that you would follow in that, too, for others; that your Poppa might deliver you from the evil ambitions that stalk this world with impunity. It's a good prayer. One that we have enshrined at the center of our common life for thousands of years past and thousands to come.

But what we can miss is what Jesus emphasized after he taught the prayer, its foundation and subtext. He wanted to hit home the character of the one to whom they were praying.

Because so much of what we say is affected by the character of who we think is listening. Like when I pet a cat that tends to scratch and bite every now and then, versus petting a cat that hasn't scratched even a post. The kind of cat I'm petting changes the petting experience, although it involves the same motions. One is tense and suspense, the other is calm and balm.

It's the same way with people. I'll accept a piece of gum from everyone here in the room, but I'll think twice when I accept a piece of gum from that childhood friend of mine.

And it is the same way with God. My prayers will be quite different to a God who I think is violent and arbitrary and concerned about power, as opposed to a God who is generous and merciful and nurturing like a momma or a poppa. And so Jesus tries to hit home that God is like a loving parent to us by eliminating the thought that God is an arbitrary prankster. "Which Abba among you," he asks, "would play cruel pranks on their child? Not one? Well then, how much more so for our heavenly Abba!"

The point of the "Our Abba" prayer is not to confirm God's maleness or patriarchal dominance. That is nothing new. Jesus is trying to open our spiritual imagination to see God as a merciful and nurturing figure. You know what a good parent is like, and God, the parent of all, is like that, but—Jesus insists—better than any loving parent you've ever met. Jesus is building on the imagery of some of the better prophets and their characterizations of God. We read from the prophet Hosea, living some 800 years before Jesus, a passage that some would rather skip because of its explicit imagery. But I'm glad we don't. Because what Hosea did as a prophet has made such a difference for us.

He sought to act out the character of God using an image that we know all too well in our political life: the image of a resolute spouse sticking by a partner despite having discovered indiscretions or a betrayal by that partner. They are the “good spouse,” and they forgive publicly and they resolve to work on the marriage, asking for your support. And then everyone and the media go wild, speculating if this is an authentic expression of steadfast, forgiving love, or something more Machiavellian, a calculated step to reclaim a positive image.

The prophet, Hosea, like some prototype of Nicolas Kristof, very publicly buys a woman out of some sort of sexual slavery. It is unknown whether she is a temple prostitute for a Canaanite fertility cult, or whether she is a little more off the grid. It is unclear if she chose her life or if it chose her. Her name is Gomer, and we do not get to hear what Gomer thinks about this marital arrangement, unfortunately. All we know is what is written about Hosea: he marries someone who had an illicit past, and he cares for her anyway. He stays married and she bears children for him, children with evocative names evoking the turbulent relationship between God and God’s people. Hosea says Gomer is unfaithful.

But like the “good spouse” political archetype, he stands by her. And this, Hosea says—as the Assyrian army in the north threatens to ravage everything—this is how God feels for us, this is how God behaves towards us in our unfaithfulness, and this is how we should treat one another: with *chesed*, with steadfast love.

And like some avant-garde performance artist, Hosea lives out the merciful character of God in his own household, even in a world that would have looked the other way if he had had Gomer killed. Hosea insisted in his teaching and in his life that God cares for us as the “good spouse” cares for the wayward partner.

The reason this is so striking is that there is plenty of biblical precedent for the principle of divine punishment. Look at what God is said to have done to Gomorrah, an entire city, in the book of Genesis. God supposedly rained down fire on Gomorrah for their unfaithfulness and awfulness. If God is like that, then the thing for a prophet of a God such as that to do would be to rain fire down on an unfaithful spouse. But Hosea doesn’t see it that way. He does not will the fate of Gomorrah for his wife Gomer. Jesus doesn’t see it this way, either. For example, one day the disciples wanted to rain down fire on a reluctant village. But Jesus renounced the request sharply. Jesus knew his Hosea. In one of the greatest lines of the Hebrew Scriptures, Hosea pronounces that God desires mercy from us, not sacrifice.

And this forgiving and merciful experience of the character of God was immortalized in the Jewish prophetic wisdom, inspiring the forgiving hearts of so many across the ages. I imagine the prophet Hosea played no small part in saving Jesus’ life, for his step-father, Joseph, could have easily chosen sacrifice and not mercy for his wife, Mary, in his time of suspicion when she became pregnant. But thanks to Hosea and his outlandish forgiveness, Joseph, the Jewish carpenter, may have found a connection and sought to serve the God of Hosea and Gomer.

The character of God is so important to clarify. People talk about God, but do they mean the same thing? We can say our prayers, but what is our God like? So much of the ministry of the prophets before Christ and the apostles and saints after Christ are set on demonstrating to us what God is really like, showing us in biography, in the flesh. And Christ’s life is the epitome of showing what God is like. And we should hold tight to this witness, especially among so many who think God is only out to support the good and holy and to punish and purify the scoundrels. Our Christian convictions are complicated by the fact that some of the many voices of the Scriptures bear witness to a God like this.

But other figures, like Hosea, renounce this two-faced characterization of God, and they point to a clearer picture, mercy for all. But this mercy is so big that many can’t handle it, even some who speak for God. And you can track a kind of two steps forward, one step back progression in the Scriptures and in Christian history, too.

Over time, in fits and starts, our collective spiritual imagination is taken out of this tiny box. Our spiritual vision has its many blinders removed. Jesus knew that this process was pivotal for our prayer. This detoxification from the standard take on God as an Enforcer is pivotal for how we live and love in the world.

Jesus wants us to see that God, the ground of all being, is not out to get us when we make mistakes (when so much of the world is). God is not out to declare us God’s beloved children one moment, and then in another moment declare us stained and ruined and prepped for being cast out or executed (even when so much of the world is waiting with baited breath to do such a thing). God is not out to strike us down when we step out of line, like some vengeful Zeus with a lightning bolt or some vengeful drone operator with a missile. God is our Abba, God is the true parent who desires, not punishment or pranks, but mercy for all of the children in the house.

And so when next we pray the Lord’s Prayer, may we ask for the loving desire of our heavenly Abba, that same Spirit to animate our own hearts. May we seek and find the spirit that Hosea sought to show forth. May we knock on THAT door, to find open to us God’s house of mercy, our true home.

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