



Liturgical Day: The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 5A (ELW Lectionary 10)

Date: June 8, 2008

Sermon Title: Steadfast Love and the Knowledge of God

Grace to you and peace, from God our father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

In the Eighth Century B.C. the prophet Hosea spoke to God's people. It was a time when the faithfulness of the Hebrew people was at low ebb. They no longer trusted God for their nation's protection, and had aligned themselves with a neighboring power. They no longer offered the kind of self-sacrificing hospitality God had commanded them to offer to the needy ones in their world. They kept the commandments, but only at a minimal level: just enough to get by – or so they thought.

Hosea realized that there was something deeply wrong with their faith lives. They muddled their way through religious ceremonies, doing what had always been done. But it no longer touched their hearts. It had become rote behavior — something so separated from the rest of their lives that it didn't speak to them with any kind of power. So Hosea spoke a word of harsh reprimand to them. Speaking on behalf of God, he said:

I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

Hosea saw that they were religious people, but they were not people of faith. On the outside they looked respectable and impressive. They said and did all the right things, but they were dying on the inside — with hearts as cold as stone, largely unaffected by their relationship with God.

I sometimes wonder what the prophet Hosea would say to us if he spent a few months at Saint Peter.

Would he see in our community a deep love for God — a love so profound that it affected everything we did, seven days a week? Would he see a passion for sharing the grace that we have received with others — newcomers to our community, neighbors across the street or across town, or brothers and sisters as far off as Tanzania or Iraq? Would he see a group of people so powerfully moved by the presence of God in their midst on Sunday morning, that it transformed the ways in which they dealt with coworkers, neighbors, family members... even fellow travelers on the freeways?

There are times when I fear Hosea would say: *Saint Peter, I desire sacrificial love and not attendance at Sunday morning worship, a lifetime of reaching out in my name rather than 64 minutes a week of listening to sermons and singing songs.* There are times when I worry about what someone like Hosea say to us here in this place.

There are other times, though, when the power of God's spirit seems so evident in this congregation, that I can imagine Hosea being quite pleased.

- I think of High School and Middle School Youth who are willing to offer an entire week of their summer – some of them two weeks – to participate in summer servant trips to Mexico and to Northern Arizona. I think, also, of the adults who travel with them, who use up a week of their precious vacation time to do so.
- I think of your strong response last week, when we received an offering to support the tornado relief efforts taking place (in our name) in Windsor and Greely and the surrounding regions. (It's not too late to contribute!)

FIRST LESSON
HOSEA 5:15-6:6

PSALM
PSALM 50:7-15

SECOND LESSON
ROMANS 4:13-25

GOSPEL LESSON

ST. MATTHEW 9:9-13, 18-26

PRAYER OF THE DAY

O GOD, YOU ARE THE
SOURCE OF LIFE AND THE
GROUND OF OUR BEING. BY
THE POWER OF YOUR SPIRIT
BRING HEALING TO THIS
WOUNDED WORLD, AND
RAISE US TO THE NEW LIFE OF
YOUR SON, JESUS CHRIST,
OUR SAVIOR AND LORD.
AMEN.

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- I think of the Sundays when this food wagon is overflowing, and when kids come up, excited to empty their hunger banks into it.

I think of examples like these, and I imagine that there are times when Hosea would be quite pleased with what happens through this congregation. God desires steadfast love and not sacrifice, Hosea said.

That's also what Jesus is trying to teach us in today's Gospel lesson. He calls a tax collector named Matthew to be one of his disciples. Tax collectors, in those days, were not obedient servants of the Internal Revenue Service. They were scoundrels — people who would take advantage of you if they saw half an opportunity. They made their living (a good living!) out of overcharging people, and keeping whatever extra they received for themselves.

After Jesus welcomes Matthew into his inner circle, Matthew throws a party for Jesus, and all of Matthew's friends are there. There Jesus is — having a dinner party with the dregs of society — people that respectable religious types would never be seen with. This makes the Pharisees (the religious leaders of that day) furious. Many people are beginning to listen to Jesus. Before long, the people will trust him more than they trust them. And just think of how morals will deteriorate if our people begin hanging around with tax collectors and sinners! So they chastise Jesus — accusing him of a great offense by eating with these unclean people. And Jesus quotes Hosea 6:6 to them. In doing so, he accuses them of the same crime that 8th Century Israel had committed. They are living the outward lives of religious people. But they are not living the inward lives of faithful people. They love the temple ceremonies, parading in front of the populace, and the prestige they receive from being religious leaders; But their hearts are cold — they'd deny the kingdom to a sinner if it cost them anything. Jesus responds with these words:

Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.

It's a simple lesson, but one that God's people seem to have a difficult time learning. God doesn't want us to be religious people. Let me say that again: God doesn't want us to be religious people. That may seem an odd thing to hear from a Pastor, but it is true: God doesn't want us to be religious people.

How can I say that? Well, I can say that because there is a tremendous difference between being a *religious person* and being a *faithful person*. A *religious person*, according to my dictionary, is *one who pursues any objective with zeal or conscientious devotion*. That's why we say that a person washes their car religiously, or follows the Rockies religiously, or reads the editorial page religiously. It should be obvious: that's not what the Christian faith is about. God doesn't want us to be religious people. God doesn't want us to do, regularly, the same thing over and over again.

No, what God wants us to be faithful people. My dictionary doesn't have a good definition of what a faithful person is, but my Bible does. According to St. Matthew, the author of this morning's Gospel lesson, Jesus said:

- 1 *No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth. [Matthew 6:24]*
- 2 *Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. [Matthew 10:39]*
- 3 *Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. [Matthew 18:4]*
- 4 *...whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many. [Matthew 20:26-28]*
- 5 *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself. [Matthew 22:37-39]*
- 6 *And Jesus came and said to them, All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age. [Matthew 28:18-20]*

The message is simple, it has been spoken for centuries, and it is spoken again to us today: God doesn't want us to be religious people, God wants us to be faithful people. It's as if God were saying: I don't want you to *go to church* every Sunday; I want you to love one another every day. I don't want you to listen to some Pastor talk about being disciples; I want you to live as disciples. I don't want you to say you believe; I want you to fill shoe boxes with supplies and give them to the poor. I don't want you to build a monument to my memory here in the community; I want you to share the good news with this community.

And so you and I are challenged this morning. We are challenged by the ministry of Hosea. We are challenged by the ministry of Jesus. We are challenged to put aside the simplicity and relative safety of being religious people. We are challenged to pick up the mantle of faithfulness, and live every day as if it were the only opportunity we have to share God's love with a broken world. These are the words of our Lord:

Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.

Fellow sinners, let us dedicate ourselves to lives of spreading the love that God has first shown to us. This is what our Lord commands us to do. Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (June 8, 2008)

Gospel: English Text ⁱ

⁹ As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him. ¹⁰ And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. ¹¹ When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" ¹² But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³ Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

¹⁸ While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader of the synagogue came in and knelt before him, saying, "My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live." ¹⁹ And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. ²⁰ Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, ²¹ for she said to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well." ²² Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." And instantly the woman was made well. ²³ When Jesus came to the leader's house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, ²⁴ he said, "Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. ²⁵ But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. ²⁶ And the report of this spread throughout that district. ⁱⁱ

Gospel: Greek Text

⁹Καὶ παράγων ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἐκεῖθεν εἶδεν ἄνθρωπον καθήμενον ἐπὶ τὸ τελώνιον, Ματθαῖον λεγόμενον, καὶ λέγει αὐτῷ· ἀκολούθει μοι. καὶ ἀναστὰς ἠκολούθησεν αὐτῷ. ¹⁰καὶ ἐγένετο αὐτοῦ ἀνακειμένου ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ, καὶ ἰδοὺ πολλοὶ τελῶναι καὶ ἁμαρτωλοὶ ἐλθόντες συνανέκειντο τῷ Ἰησοῦ καὶ τοῖς μαθηταῖς αὐτοῦ. ¹¹καὶ ἰδόντες οἱ Φαρισαῖοι ἔλεγον τοῖς μαθηταῖς αὐτοῦ· διὰ τί μετὰ τῶν τελωνῶν καὶ ἁμαρτωλῶν ἐσθίει ὁ διδάσκαλος ὑμῶν; ¹²ὁ δὲ ἀκούσας εἶπεν· οὐ χρεῖαν ἔχουσιν οἱ ἰσχύοντες ἰατροῦ ἀλλ' οἱ κακῶς ἔχοντες. ¹³πορευθέντες δὲ μάθετε τί ἐστίν· ἔλεος θέλω καὶ οὐ θυσίαν· οὐ γὰρ ἤλθον καλέσαι δικαίους ἀλλὰ ἁμαρτωλούς.

¹⁸Ταῦτα αὐτοῦ λαλοῦντος αὐτοῖς, ἰδοὺ ἄρχων εἰς ἐλθὼν προσεκύνει αὐτῷ λέγων ὅτι ἡ θυγάτηρ μου ἄρτι ἐτελεύτησεν· ἀλλὰ ἐλθὼν ἐπίθεσ τὴν χεῖρα σου ἐπ' αὐτήν, καὶ ζήσεται. ¹⁹καὶ ἐγερθεὶς ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἠκολούθησεν αὐτῷ καὶ οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ. ²⁰Καὶ ἰδοὺ γυνὴ αἰμορροοῦσα δώδεκα ἔτη προσελθοῦσα ὀπισθεν ἤψατο τοῦ κρασπέδου τοῦ ἱματίου αὐτοῦ. ²¹ἔλεγεν γὰρ ἐν ἑαυτῇ· ἐὰν μόνον ἄψωμαι τοῦ ἱματίου αὐτοῦ σωθήσομαι. ²²ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς στραφεὶς καὶ ἰδὼν αὐτήν εἶπεν· θάρσει, θύγατερ· ἡ πίστις σου σέσωκεν σε. καὶ ἐσώθη ἡ γυνὴ ἀπὸ τῆς ὥρας ἐκείνης. ²³Καὶ ἐλθὼν ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἰς τὴν οἰκίαν τοῦ ἀρχοντος καὶ ἰδὼν τοὺς αὐλητὰς καὶ τὸν ὄχλον θορυβούμενον ²⁴ἔλεγεν· ἀναχωρεῖτε, οὐ γὰρ ἀπέθανεν τὸ κοράσιον ἀλλὰ καθεύδει. καὶ κατεγέλων αὐτοῦ. ²⁵ὅτε δὲ ἐξεβλήθη ὁ ὄχλος εἰσελθὼν ἐκράτησεν τῆς χειρὸς αὐτῆς, καὶ ἠγέρθη τὸ κοράσιον. ²⁶καὶ ἐξῆλθεν ἡ φήμη αὕτη εἰς ὅλην τὴν γῆν ἐκείνην. ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church_year/lectionary.html.

ⁱⁱ St. Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

ⁱⁱⁱ St. Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).