



Proper 17, Year C – July 25, 2010

Hosea 1:2-8; Luke 11:1 -13

A Homily preached by the Rev'd James Popham

"Give us this day our daily bread." Not a year's supply. Not a month's supply. Not a week's supply. Our daily bread. Enough for today. Have you ever wondered what it would look like to have enough? Just enough? Just enough food for today in the pantry and refrigerator? Just enough space in our homes for what we really need? Just enough clothes? Think about that one.

A woman in Kenosha, Wisconsin, did. And then embarked on a self-inflicted "closet diet." She reduced her wardrobe to six items. Six. And for an entire month those six items were her wardrobe (not counting shoes, undergarments, and the one thing that distinguishes us from lower animals, accessories.) (I'd love to take credit for that line but it's from the stage play and movie, *Steel Magnolias*.) She succeeded on this sartorial fast notwithstanding that she is a wife and the mother of two young children; that their household includes a golden retriever and three cats; that she had an hour long commute each way to her new job as an insurance sales executive; and that she routinely played football with her son and held tea parties (the non-political kind with child-size china cups) with her daughter.

Here's the punch line. No one noticed. Even after 31 days and even after she wore floral print pajamas to do yard work, her husband had not noticed.

Yet concepts of marriage and family and the love of spouses for each other and parents for their children often are touted as metaphors for God's love. This husband didn't even notice! Is that our vision of God? Or how about the God who tells Hosea "Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom?" Or who throws up his hands and says, "[Y]ou are not my people and I am not your God." In essence, I don't even care to notice you anymore.

Now it is bad enough to imagine being the husband of a prostitute in today's culture. But in the culture of Hosea's time, it would have been even worse. It was to say the least a patriarchal culture. Descent was traced through the male line. The oldest living male was head of the household. The eldest son received the family inheritance. Wives left their homes and became part of their husband's family. Sons were valued more than daughters because they continued the family line, and producing sons was the primary contribution of a wife. Women were essentially disenfranchised and were expected to behave with modesty, deference, and weakness, and certainly to avoid sexual impropriety.

And if she was sexually active outside marriage, she shamed her husband and his family and exposed the husband as weak and unable to control his wife and protect the family honor. He would be demeaned and humiliated.

Yet, Hosea the prophet puts God metaphorically in just that position: "[F]or the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord." At the great convocation among the gods, above the firmament, Yahweh would have been a laughing stock. And what was Israel, in this case, the northern kingdom, up to, to be called the whoring wife of Yahweh? Just a few historical notes say a lot. Government, the monarchy, was corrupt and partisan. No fewer than six kings had died violently. The gulf between the rich and the poor was constantly widening. And even the rich were resorting to fraud and cheating to enhance their position in the face of deficit budgets resulting from the burdens of war and tribute. Foreign policy was inconsistent, and various

kings allied with various more powerful nations who not only threatened the northern kingdom, but also warred with each other. Good thing times have changed!

Compounding the socio-political evils rampant at the time, worship of Yahweh, the one true God, remained contaminated with aspects of the Canaanite religion including the worship of other gods like Baal and the use of temple prostitutes in worship.

What kind of self-respecting God would put up with this? Who is this God who would like Hosea as a husband suffer the humiliation of a wife acting so shamelessly, so dishonourably? And the answer, of course, provides some of the best news we could hear. Because the God that would put up with this sort of faithless abuse, this virtual adultery, and still welcome a repentant prostitute bride back into his loving arms, is our God. The God we call "our father."

But, again, of course, we have to confront two concerns. Why father? Why not mother? Why not parent? And, for many, the experience and image of a father or parent is problematic, if not outright repugnant. Some parents are abusive. Some are absentee. Some are unfaithful in every sense of the word. And yet we are expected to pray to this father God as a loving and nurturing parent, whose love knows no bounds.

To suggest an answer to the first question, we must recall that first century Israel was still a patriarchal culture. Men held the privileged position. To pray to a God that was other than male would have denied God the privileged position vis-à-vis humanity and creation. To insinuate any feminine side to God then would have portrayed God as weak, dependent, and subject to control. Fortunately, we know better today. We do, don't we? And I am sure that new expressions of this great prayer to the father will find a new salutation to God that comprehends the fullness of God as embodying characteristics that subsume and no doubt extend well beyond our notions of male and female.

And when we speak of God as parent, we must remind ourselves that when we are speaking of God, we are speaking in the realm of the ideal. As hard as it may be to put aside our experience or preconceptions of an imperfect parent, we must do our best to understand that our prayer is to God as the ideal parent: One who loves unceasingly and tirelessly; one who will welcome us back into loving embrace even when we have rebelled and disobeyed and dishonoured them in the most heinous ways. This is what Hosea wants us to understand – and what is said in what to me is the most important word in Jesus' prayer – father. Because in this word we say so very much about the characteristics and character of God. This is the word that insists that we trust God as we can no other – even – and especially, ourselves.

This the God of ours will forgive us our closets, so full of clothes we stand at the door, ponder endlessly, and still think we have nothing to wear. This is the God who will smile when we pare down to six items of clothing and discover that that's all we need for an entire month. And certainly more than we need for eternal life.

For those of you who were wondering by the way. The six items were a black blazer and pants, two button-down shirts, a pair of jeans, and a pink t-shirt. For more information, go to sixitemsorless.com. I dare you.

Amen