



10 Sunday (Ordinary time)

June 8, 2008

Hosea 6:3-6

Romans 4:18-25

Matthew 9:9-13

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WE ARE CHRIST'S BODY

When things go badly, we generally call on God for help. When we are sinful, then repentance is in order. The question is whether this call for God's help and action on our part is a deep-felt re-forming, or redirection of our lives or just a "guilt spurt? It may also be that we really aren't sure what God wants in return for mercy.

In the first reading, Hosea, the prophet, carries some strong messages to Israel, and the people are saying their affliction which has been caused by their rebellion will soon pass. God will be as sure as the rains like the dawn, like the light of day in their lives. There is actually a bit of smugness and a casual turning back to God, but not totally back. There is the hint of presumption of God's mercy. To this the prophet had something more to say.

First he reviews how God has dealt with the rebellious before them. Their religious commitment has been flimsy and external. The final judgment against their kind of piety is that God desires love and knowledge of God from within and not mere external sacrificial offerings. What God is asking is hearts, not merely hands, not mere empty ritual, service not services.

The Gospel is both the calling of Matthew and the beginning round of the conflict between the ways of Jesus and those of the Pharisees. Matthew, or Levi, is a tax collector. This is not an incidental fact. The occupation connoted greed, thievery, and disloyalty. How much more crooked can one get! He, a Jew, was, in the Jewish mind, a traitor and sinner to his people since he collected taxes for the Roman authorities. Jesus invites him, of all peoples, to follow him and he does. Apparently he invited Jesus to his house for a meal, - to be a part of a gathering of "sinners" like himself. The Pharisees ask their accusatory question, and in response Jesus gives them a lesson according to their own Jewish tradition.

The messages of all three of these readings speak of the importance of faith, and the relationship of faith to sacrifice and love. In the second reading, we are reminded of our father Abraham and his love and sacrifices for his people. Oh, that you and I could have the faith of an Abraham. His belief in God empowered him to have hope against hope! He trusted in his God to deliver him from any evil. What a gift to have from God. I am not trying to be clever when I say, "you may have it." There are numerous times in life when we have

hoped against hope like Abraham and there may be more times ahead to answer such a call. Abraham was an old man and describes himself as “dead in body” and his wife, Sarah, barren, beyond the age of child-bearing. And he was promised to be the father of a nation as countless as the stars. That is hope against hope! Then there was the call to sacrifice his son, Isaac! We are called at times to take into our hearts that hope against hope which is God’s gift to the open heart.

Without a focus in God, translated into sincere and compassionate caring for one another, our piety would be “like a morning cloud, like the dew that passes early away.” The one who practices such piety is, indeed, dead. A little bit of tough love here and love nonetheless.

When God, through the prophet, told the Israelites that God wanted them to trade sacrifices for love, they were insulted. And so they treated the prophet as they usually did. They ignored him, and abused him for such nonsense!

We might react in the same fashion if, after years of sacrificing ourselves for someone or a cause, said that to us. At least, it would be hard to understand at first glance. One does not dismiss sacrificing oneself for years of showing one’s loyalty, and trade it in easily for something else, not even love. After all, the Israelites had done exactly what they thought was expected of them in their sacrifices for their God and other people. And now a prophet comes along and says that God wants love not sacrifice. That is what we can assume they heard or didn’t hear – and then chose to try to understand or not.

Sacrifice is an essential, if not the most essential ingredient, of all religions. The practice of sacrifice has been the standard for influencing the god of one’s choice. Something that feels so right can’t entirely be wrong. Sacrifice is ingrained in human nature, sometimes pushed on us, at other times chosen for very good reasons. It has to be a natural, normal, acceptable practice and offering to God and those we love. It is an honest offering of a dearly held part of myself. Whether or not it does anybody else any good, it makes us grateful, generous partners in a common enterprise. We know that if we lose a sense of personal and communal sacrifice in our families, churches, society, we give up something meaningful for making ourselves and others better.

Then the Lord comes along and says, “It is love that I desire, not sacrifice, and knowledge of God rather than holocausts.” He is not saying there is no place for sacrificial offerings, but there is a priority to be realized: of love to sacrifice. Love, and genuine love, must be the motive for any sacrifice one is willing to make. In Old Testament times the

prophets did not denounce sacrifice outright. They did denounce sacrifice unaccompanied by obedience.

I think we can see ourselves counted among the friends at the dinner at Matthew's house, as we can see ourselves counted among the friends of the Lord at this table. It is beneficial that we, as a praying assembly allow ourselves to be challenged, as Jesus allowed himself and his friends to be challenged that time at the house of Matthew. We are encouraged, first, by the example of Abraham, whose faith enabled him to truly know and trust God, then by the exhortation of Hosea to keep our liturgies pious as well as practical, God-centered and alive rather than self-centered and dead, and finally, again, by the willingness of Matthew, the tax collector and other sinners, to acknowledge their need for healing and forgiveness, accepting and finding both in Jesus' presence.

There is an old saying: when we walk one step towards God, God will run ten steps towards us. Let us pray this day and each the prayer of St. Ignatius: *Lord, grant that I may see you more clearly, love you more dearly and follow you more nearly. Amen.*

Understanding the wedding of love and sacrifice in our lives, there is no way our response will be, as Hosea put it, like the morning cloud and dew that early passes away.

As we conclude, listen to the wonderful message of St. Teresa of Avila as she heard the call and challenge to be a disciple of Christ. It is a message for us all to recognize our call and challenge to be a healing presence in our world. She once wrote:

Christ has no body now on earth but yours,

no feet but yours, no hands but yours.

*Yours are the eyes through which the compassion of Christ
is to look out on a hurting world.*

Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good.

Yours are the hands with which he is to bless all now.