

## Forgiven and Faithful

I am glad to be back at Trinity Cathedral today after driving some two thousand miles around the east and southeastern United States. After representing the Diocese of Iowa at General Convention in Baltimore, Raisin and I headed south, visiting where we lived in Durham when we were first married and the first Episcopal Church we ever attended together in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. The Rector at that time was subsequently elected the Bishop of Virginia. On the day we visited the church was preparing for his funeral. It reminded us that forty years had passed since we were last there.

As I think about those times I realize how much has changed in the life of the church. In particular, I'm acutely aware that we can no longer assume that those who walk through our doors will have had some church background. What seems so familiar to us by long experience can be quite foreign to others. Nowhere else in our society do people sing together in public, for instance; even the national anthem has become a solo event. We use a lot of words that are not in everyday conversation, what some call churchspeak. And the Bible that we revere can be inscrutable or even offensive. I'm especially aware of that today.

The first reading began with Hosea taking "a wife of whoredom" on God's orders. Not surprisingly, she then has a number of children who are probably not Hosea's. All are given obscure and threatening names. The second lesson seems obsessed with circumcision. The Gospel reading has an odd-sounding form of what we call the Lord's Prayer. I suspect that visitors aren't the only ones left scratching their heads. You may be, too.

So let's start with Hosea. It will help to know three things about the time in which he lived. First, he was a prophet, and prophets liked to act things out, not just talk about them. Second, wives were considered property. That rightly offends us, but that was the culture whether we like it or not. And third, the nation of Israel understood its relationship with God as a covenant. Each party promised to do certain things. When Israel worshipped local gods rather than the God who had guided and protected them, the covenant was broken, like breaking the covenant of marriage. Put those three ideas together and it makes sense that Hosea would act out the situation by making a marriage covenant with someone whom he knew would not be faithful, just as God made a covenant with people who also turned out to be unfaithful. God, however, is always faithful. If and when the people turned back, he would take them in again. So the passage we heard ends with a note of hope.

The second reading also challenges modern ears. Here we have to remember that the author was a Jewish man who knew that the most personal difference between him and non-Jewish men was that he was circumcised and they were not. Such language also offends us, but circumcision is not really the point. Instead it represents the same covenant as in Hosea: a promise of God's blessing to faithful people. What's different in the letter to the Colossians is that God's promise and blessing are now available to everyone, not just the chosen few. Through Jesus Christ, God forgave the sins of everyone. All who seek God are freely given new life.

Forgiveness is also prominent in the Lord's Prayer. Some scholars believe that the prayer originally existed in two forms – the one we heard today in Luke's Gospel, and the more familiar form in Matthew's. Those who have been to different churches know that some forgive "debts" rather than "sins," and others end the prayer at "deliver us from evil." However it is prayed, every version links God's forgiveness with ours. We are reminded to forgive others because God first forgave us.

The common theme in all three readings, then, is God's faithfulness and our waywardness. In spite of our propensity to worship other gods, or things that are not God, God still loves us and desires to be in relationship with us. That is the consistent message from the ancient prophets of Israel through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We all need forgiveness. We all fall short of being the people God wants us to be. But God is faithful. God is waiting for us to turn back so that we may be forgiven. There's no churchspeak in that. It's true whatever language we use. And whether you are in church for the first time or the thousandth time, God is still waiting to forgive you and to bless you. Isn't it time you said "yes" to that blessing?

[Pentecost 7: Hosea 1:2-10; Colossians 2:6-19; Luke 11:1-13.]