Hosea 11:1-11
Psalm 107:1-9, 43
Colossians 3:1-11
Luke 12:13-21

The Rev. Samuel Wells, vicar of St. Martin in the Fields, London, has written: “Christianity is fundamentally a story about where we’re going: into the company of God’s grace, in the harmony of the restored creation, through the mercy of God’s incarnate love (Jesus). Church means giving up the fantasy that we can find fulfillment and righteousness alone. It means doing things at inconvenient times, with eccentric people, in sometimes clumsy ways – because life is a team game, and on judgment day, God will have nothing to say to us, if we think we can come without the others.”1 All of our readings this morning illustrate what Samuel Wells is getting at.

The prophet Hosea continued to speak God’s word to a wayward people. Israel had forgotten all of the times that God had saved them from others, and from themselves. God brought them out of slavery in Egypt. God gave them food and water in the wilderness. God led them into a land flowing with milk and honey. God gave them all the gifts and talents that they needed to thrive and prosper in this new land. Yet over the years, they became proud and self-centered. “The more I called them (said God), the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols.” As angry as this made God, God’s love tempered his actions. “…my compassion grows warm and tender (God says). I will not execute my fierce anger...”

This is all about God’s grace, God’s compassion, God’s love.

“Like a parent whose child has gone astray, God is angry and anguished (about Israel’s waywardness), but this cannot nullify God’s love. While we may have more “rational” and “dispassionate” understandings of God’s love, we need to ask ourselves imaginatively, questions such as “What would anger God about our behavior?” (our behavior as individuals? as a church? as a nation?) “Where have we brought pain to God?”2 Where have we brought pain to one another?Through the voice of the prophet Hosea, God was asking this of God’s chosen people many centuries ago. These questions continue to be asked in our day by those who stand as prophets in our midst. So where are we going as a Christian people?

Saint Paul challenged the Christians in Colossae to “seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.” He was not encouraging them to look for pie in the sky in the near by and by, as noted by the songwriter Joe Hill. Paul was urging them to put aside the idolatry and the individualism of their culture, to put on Christ instead, to live in the light of Jesus’ resurrection. Paul reminded them of what their story is, of what Jesus’ story is, essentially, “seek ye first the kingdom of God.” In God’s kingdom, there is no fornication, evil desire, greed. In God’s kingdom there is no anger, wrath or malice. In God’s kingdom there is no Greek or Jew, slave or free, enemy or alien, “but Christ is all in all.”

We Christians do not live our lives as isolated individuals. We live within a community of faith, a community of respect, a community of love. We carry one another’s burdens. We cherish the dignity of every human being. We try to love one another, as much as God loves us. While we can understand this with our minds, how do we live it out day by day? What do we do to counteract the individualism of our culture? How do we avoid treating individuals as objects that we can use and then dispose of? How do we affirm the fact that everyone is made in God’s image, whether or not they look like us or talk like us or think like us? Where are we going as a Christian people?

The leadership of Washington National Cathedral has written this week: “We have come to accept a level of insult and abuse in political discourse today that violates each person’s sacred identity as a child of God. We have come to accept as normal a steady stream of language and accusations … that plays to racist elements in society. Make no mistake about it, words matter. Violent words lead to violent actions. When does silence become complicity? What will it take for us all to say, with one voice, that we have had enough? We must boldly stand witness against … bigotry, hatred, intolerance, and prejudice”3 … wherever we encounter them. (end quote) “,…God is resolutely focused on renewing a world gone bad. God enters human affairs in the hope of repairing them...”4 God invites us to participate in this great mission of reconciliation. Where are we going as a Christian people?

The good news that Luke has to share with us today also emphasizes that our focus as followers of Jesus is not on ourselves or what we possess….be it things or wealth or bigger barns…but our focus is to be on loving God and serving our neighbors. You know, references to the rich are almost uniformly negative in the Gospels and almost always contrasted with positive references to the poor. God sends the rich away empty in Mary’s prophetic poetry. Blessed are the poor for theirs is the kingdom of heaven, we hear in the Beatitudes. In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, we hear that if the rich haven’t listened to Moses and the prophets, they won’t be convinced “even if someone rises from the dead.” And that very rich ruler seeking the way to eternal life lacks only one thing, that he sell his possessions and give the money to the poor.

If we are to be faith-filled followers of Jesus we need to look beyond the accumulation of things that often provide a false sense of security. Instead, we are called to share what we have in an attitude of abundance rather than scarcity. We actively choose to do one thing or the other, to be rich with barns or rich with God, to serve God or to serve mammon – wealth. Where are we going as a Christian people?

Jesus calls us to lift up our eyes to the birds of the air and out to the lilies of the field. Jesus calls us to turn away from treasure that corrupts and is corruptible toward the kingdom and fullness of life, which we already know from Luke is rooted in wholehearted love of God and of neighbor. In today’s good news, Jesus recognizes that what underlies excessive accumulation is most often anxiety and fear.5 And perhaps that is why one of the most common phrases in the Gospels is “Peace. Do not be afraid.” Jesus knows our human nature seeks peace in things more often than peace in God. But the peace that might come from abundance is never as long lasting, nor as fulfilling, as is the peace that comes from God.

May the peace of God that surpasses all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God and of his Son, Jesus Christ. May we walk in love, as Christ loved us, sharing that love with all that we meet. May we seek first the kingdom of God, while actively working to bring forth heaven here on earth. That’s where we Christians are going.

1. The Christian Century, July 31, 2019, inside cover advertisement
2. https://www.patheos.com/blogs/livingaholyadventure/2016/07/the-adventurous-lectionary-eleventh-sunday-after-pentecost-july-31-2016/
3. https://cathedral.org/have-we-no-decency-a-response-to-president-trump.html
4. The Christian Century, July 31, 2019, “Is God violent?” p.29
5. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\_id=2923