

Sermon for Proper 13C
St. John's, Gloucester
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A man approaches Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to share the family inheritance with me." Seems like a reasonable request, but Jesus responds by chiding the man, warning him against greed. And telling a parable of a rich man who died, leaving behind a mass of possessions but little of what really matters, his life with God. And this, just after the story of Mary and Martha, sisters in conflict!

How much strife there is in families! Our closest relationships are often fraught with conflict. Reading this passage reminded me that in the last few weeks, I have heard stories of three families torn apart around the dying and death of a family member. In one, a daughter, worried about her inheritance, kept other family members away from her father, which meant that he was isolated and lonely in his final years. In another, a daughter who probably has mental illness insisted on taking care of her aging mother, but kept her mostly confined to her bed and sometimes neglected her. She also refused to let her gay sister come and visit their mother and delayed getting the mother the care she needed. In the third story, my friend, the oldest of 8 siblings, did all she could to take care of her mother, but was also working full time. Her mother had many health conditions and ended up in a nursing home. She didn't receive adequate care there, developed terrible bedsores, and died a painful death. Where was the rest of my friend's family during all this? I don't know.

When I worked in Hospice, I naively thought that families facing the death of a loved one would bond together for the good of the dying one. But my supervisor disabused me of that notion. She said, "The families that work together before illness are the ones that work together during a terminal illness. The ones that are dysfunctional before will continue that way, but even more so in the time of dying and death." How true her words are! And given the current pressures on families with Covid and rising heat and all, it's even harder for families to function well. There is more mental illness, especially among young people, and more gun violence, especially suicides. Inflation and rising housing costs are increasing stress in many families.

Not only that, I believe that we are in a time of general societal collapse. Our national government seems to be completely dysfunctional, not addressing the huge complex problems that are facing us, and not advocating for what the people need and want. Climate change? Let's keep drilling oil. Racism? Let's keep building prisons. Housing crisis? Let's keep subsidizing luxury condos. And meanwhile, the country is on fire, there is drought with crop failure sure to follow, rising prices, supply chain problems, worker shortages, gun violence, and concerted efforts to take away rights from everyone who is not a native-born white man. The workers in the nursing home who neglected my friend's mother? There was surely individual culpability, but they were no doubt part of a system under stress, asking too much from understaffed, overworked and underpaid nurses and aides, where the emphasis was on making money, not providing the best care.

In Hosea, in one of the most beautiful passages in the Bible, God pours out their anguish for Israel, their beloved child. “The more I called them, the more they went from me . . . Yet it was I who taught Ephraim (Israel) to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them.” God, the loving parent, who only wants the best for their child.

But the child is rebellious; Israel will not follow God but instead worships idols and has fallen into destructive relationships. So therefore, the future is bleak—it is Egypt and Assyria. “They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me.” In the Hebrew Bible, the places “Egypt” and “Assyria” have specific connotations. Egypt was where the Hebrews went to escape famine in the time of Joseph, but over time they became oppressed and enslaved. It was a dark time for them; they were rescued by God through Moses, but “Egypt” was a state they never wanted to return to. “Assyria” was a powerful nation to the north and east of Israel, always a threat. Soon it would conquer the kingdom of Israel, destroying it and carrying many of its people into exile in Assyria. (“Babylon” would later become the same for the southern kingdom of Judah—the source of destruction and exile for the people). God is saying that because the people have played the whore, they will return to slavery, “Egypt,” and experience destruction and exile from their homeland, “Assyria.”

I think these words are significant today. The dominant culture in our country and even in our churches has focused more on “possessions” and “greed” than on the things of God—prayer, humility, right relationship, justice, mercy, compassion, tending the vulnerable, collaborating with and tending God’s Creation. We have not ordered our priorities and relationships correctly, and while things are going to get worse, I believe we’re already in “Egypt” and “Assyria.” We are enslaved to things and to making money and to a way of life dependent on burning fossil fuels. Our institutions are crumbling, and we are more and more exiled from “home.” Home is a place—and more and more people are having to move because they can’t afford housing, or they are being displaced because of wildfires or floods or disappearing coastline. But home is also a spiritual and emotional place—a sense of security, well-being, safety, loving relationships. And relationships are fraying, dissolving, suffering. We are in a home crisis. Even if you have a place to live, you may be lonely, estranged, in crisis with family.

In Hosea, God says, “Egypt and Assyria are in your future. And I can’t or won’t stop it.” In essence, God is saying, “This is the result of your infidelity, your greed and willfulness.” It WILL happen, and in fact, it does. Israel is overrun in 722 BC by the Assyrians; the country is destroyed and many of its people carried off to Assyria. But the future, though deserved, grieves God the Parent. “How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? . . . My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath. . . They shall come trembling like birds from Egypt, and like doves from the land of Assyria; and I will return them to their homes, says the Lord.”

God is not like humans. At some point, even human parents may give up on their children, especially if the children are adults. “You’ve made your bed; now you have to lie in it.”

And God does let the children of Israel suffer the consequences of their actions. But God never abandons them, and never withdraws support or the promise to restore them. “I shall return them to their homes.”

If we are captured in slavery to a dying and deadly culture that does not value human life and does not value the life of the planet that sustains us; if we are increasingly exiled from family members and healthy relationships and the “other,” what hope is there now for us? I think it is the word from Hosea—that though we will not escape Egypt and Assyria, that we will suffer increasingly from our dominant culture greed and violence—God still promises to bring us “home.” Home means, I believe, creating and sustaining relationships that are based in God, that are life-giving and supportive, that nurture joy and hope, that provide space for grief, tools for healing, that build capacity to acknowledge our part in past harms and to create more equitable, sustainable systems that redress old wounds. There are many groups and many people engaged in this “home-making,” this envisioning and enacting new ways of being in relationship. But this, it seems, should be the primary work of the church, any church, at this point in history. We have a God of relationship, we have rituals and spiritual tools—do they nurture relationship? We have music, we have properties, we have an endowment—do they primarily support relationship? If they do, relationship to WHOM? What KIND of relationships?

The take home message is—watch out, your home is going to be destroyed. My brother returned to Boulder, CO recently where my family lived for 7 years. The family house had been torn down. All the trees around it were also removed, including the large willow that we used to play under and the aspen tree my other brother gave to the family. All this to make way for a new McMansion. He sent pictures. Your home is going to be destroyed. But I will be with you and I will help you make and find a new home. Already I see signs of newness and hope here in this place. Do you? Let us pray. Amen.