

+ The Holy Scriptures, for all their complexity and diversity, in both the Old and New Testaments, spanning millennia of sacred history, can basically be reduced to a single narrative pattern. Call it a paradigm, a trope, or even a myth, unless you misunderstand that to mean 'a falsehood.' A rich man takes a poor wife, lifting her from actual or potential poverty, oppression, and shame. This act is, to a degree, inexplicable. It is done for love. The bride is not particularly lovable to the disinterested observer—but, we must suppose, the heart has its reasons. Following a joyful honeymoon, the wife becomes restless. What begins as foolish flirtation soon blossoms into full-blown infidelity, then outright prostitution. She ends in total slavery, abject poverty, destitute of friends and lovers, far worse off than in those humble circumstances from which her first marriage drew her. Then something yet more inexplicable occurs. Her husband searches for her in the slums, finds her, and pays her new masters in order to bring her back home, unlovely and unrighteous as she is. Why the husband should act in the way that he does boggles the mind—it is as equally mind-boggling as the behavior of the wife-turned-woman-of-ill-repute.

The husband in this story is, of course, God Himself; the unfaithful bride represents His people. Over and over again, especially in the Old Testament, God characterizes His relationship to the covenant people of Israel as a marriage, and not a particularly happy one. The unhappiness is repeatedly the result of His people's tendency to stray, to wander off in dangerous directions, to forget to whom they belong, and to forget the Egypt from which they were originally rescued. Eventually, God's people have this strange ability, it seems, to re-create Egypt, i.e., to summon the tyrant Pharaoh, the whips of his taskmasters, his false priests, and his murderous, child-slaying henchmen, even in the land which flows with milk and honey. We noted this a couple of weeks ago when considering the character of King Solomon, David's heir. The wisest of all the Israelite kings, blessed with wealth, peace, and the glory of God dwelling in His temple, we nevertheless noted that, for all His temporal blessings, Solomon's eyes and hands began to stray. He took, we remember, Pharaoh's daughter to wife, besides hundreds of others, who turned His heart from God. He became a type of Pharaoh himself, transformed from the Son of David to just another Pharaonic Son-in-Law.

I mentioned also, when we looked at *Ecclesiastes*, the ruin of Israel accomplished by Solomon's heir, Rehoboam, who inherited his father's tyrannical bent without the benefit of his shrewdness and practical wisdom. After Solomon's death, because of Rehoboam's cruelty, ten out of the twelve tribes of Israel elected a political exile, by the name of Jeroboam, to be their king. Jeroboam had been hiding out in, of all places, Egypt, while Solomon still lived, and he arrived on the scene just in time to take advantage of widespread discontent with the king's rightful heir and his tyrannical policies. From then on, Israel would be divided into two kingdoms—in the North, the dynasty established by Jeroboam, of the tribe of Ephraim, with its capital at the ancient city of Shechem, and, in the South, the rump of David's kingdom at Jerusalem, nevertheless encompassing the lands of two of Israel's most populous tribes, Judah and Benjamin.

By the eighth century, B.C., roughly 150 years after Solomon's death, the transformation of North Israel was more or less complete. Beginning with Jeroboam's own religious policies, the ten northern tribes had systematically pursued a course of cultural and religious assimilation. Fearing that the temple at Jerusalem would prove a draw toward re-unification with the house of

David, the Northern Israelites first established two alternative shrines, complete with golden calves. By the time of the prophet Hosea, however, the people of northern Israel had basically relinquished any pretension to their original monotheism, and had adopted wholesale the cult of the Syro-Phoenician and Canaanite Baals, which religion I've had ample opportunity to describe in other homilies. 150 years from wife to prostitute. The northern kingdom of Israel had, in that time, virtually become what it was later to be—Samaria, the Jewish version of the “the wrong side of the tracks.” Hundreds of years later, when Jesus mentions to the Samaritan woman at the well outside of Shechem: “Thou hast had five husbands, and he whom now thou hast is not thy husband,” it is as much of an historical and cultural analysis as it is a personal one.

For her infidelity, the Northern kingdom of Israel was fated to suffer the inevitable consequences. In 721 BC, after years of fruitless politicking and alliance-making with the Gentile empires that surrounded her, North Israel would finally succumb to a brutal Assyrian invasion, her people then so dispersed and subsumed by a foreign power that they would earn the label, “the lost tribes of Israel.” The southern remnant, the remains of David's dynasty, only marginally more faithful than the tribes to the north, would crumple some two hundred years later. It was shortly before the collapse of the Northern Kingdom that the prophet Hosea lived and ministered to the ten faithless and spiritually wandering tribes.

The form of his ministry was so shocking to later Jewish rabbis that they did their best to explain it away. From the text of the book of Hosea, it appears that God, in a vision, commanded the prophet to take to wife a woman named Gomer, a woman of questionable morals and character. What played out was exactly the narrative arc which I've already mentioned. She doesn't hang around. In the end, the prophet is forced to purchase his disgraced spouse from her new owners. The symbolism is obvious—Gomer is Israel, her wandering and eventual destitution is both the religious infidelity of the Israelites and the imminent captivity and destruction which is soon to overtake them. The later Jewish rabbis were so scandalized by this dramatized and living sacramental picture of God and His people that they insisted the righteous prophet Hosea had only done these things in a vision—for God would never command a righteous man actually to marry such a woman. One can't help but think they might have missed the point. For it is only a righteous and merciful God who marries Himself to such a people.

At the close of his prophecy, Hosea makes the symbolic import of his marriage to Gomer undeniably clear:

O Israel, return unto the Lord thy God; for thou hast fallen by thine iniquity. Take with you words, and turn to the Lord: say unto him, Take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously: so will we render the calves of our lips. Assyria shall not save us; we will not ride upon horses: neither will we say any more to the work of our hands, Ye are our gods: for in thee the fatherless findeth mercy. I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely: for mine anger is turned away from him. I will be as the dew unto Israel: he shall grow as the lily, and cast forth his roots as Lebanon. His branches shall spread, and his beauty shall be as the olive tree, and his smell as Lebanon. They that dwell under his shadow shall return; they shall revive as the corn, and grow as the vine: the scent thereof shall be as the wine of Lebanon. Ephraim shall say, What have I to do any more with idols? I have heard him, and observed him: I am like a green fir tree. From me is thy fruit found. Who is wise, and he shall understand these things? prudent, and he shall know them? for the ways of the Lord are right, and the just shall walk in them: but the transgressors shall fall therein.

“From me is thy fruit found.” St. Paul picks up this language of fruit in our epistle reading, and adds to it a discussion of both freedom and servanthood, or, more accurately speaking, *douleia*, slavery. The Gospel of Jesus Christ describes for us a rigid and uncompromising truth. We are all of us in one of two conditions. We are either slaves to sin and death, and thus “free” from God and righteousness, or else we are free from that cycle of sin and death, from that iniquity unto iniquity, and therefore slaves of God. There is not what the philosophers would call a *tertium quid*, some middle ground. The glorious liberty of the children of God, of which St. Paul speaks later in *Romans*, is not a self-determining and absolute liberty. It is freedom *from* sin, death, and Satan. It is synonymous with total commitment to God, obedience to the rule of righteousness and peace. No man can serve two masters, but we will serve one or the other. God or Mammon. Christ or Satan. Wife or that other word with the aspirated “w.”

Unfortunately, in this day and age, the grace of that God who continues to pursue, who never tires in His love and redemptive reach after the wandering and the lost, is often misconstrued and cheapened. This often amounts to the claim that the redeemed bride is redeemed in name only, and continues to live in a state of prostitution. To be redeemed is to be, like Hosea's Gomer, led back into the house of marriage. It is to be restored, beyond our deserving, and despite our unfaithfulness, to a dwelling-place with God in Christ. The redemption itself is gracious, but the relationship established, or rather, re-established by that redemption, is, like all relationships, a regular one—that is, it is characterized by and, in fact, by definition cannot exist apart from law. It is not the Mosaic law of Sinai—that was the law given by a Father to His children. The law between husband and wife is different. It is unwritten—can you imagine a husband and wife sitting down to codify in detail the written rules to codify their behavior toward each other? In a human marriage, that's a short way to disaster. A legal code cannot possibly describe the dynamism of a deep and abiding union. It could only, in the most basic sense, draw the outermost boundaries of that oneness. The law between God the husband, and His people, is what is variously called in the New Testament the “law of Love,” the “law of the Spirit,” and it is written on the heart.

This law and harmony of the union between God and Man accomplished in the Body of Christ is analogous to what scientists might term “a law of nature.” The vine is planted in the ground. The frequency of the rains, temperature, dewfall, the composition of the soil—these things in regularity bring forth, as if automatically, a certain result. You get Merlot, Sangiovese, Bordeaux, Pinot Noir, etc. Every year, fortunes are staked on the constant predictability, the relative reliability of this process. The law that governs both our redemption and our relationship with God is even more reliable—it is not a natural but a supernatural law. And the same can be said for its inverse. That which is planted in God, grafted into the vine of Christ, the same brings forth the fruit of righteousness unto holiness. Any other soil, any other vine, leads ineluctably to stagnation and death. Like all growth, there will be a process involved. Pruning will be necessary. Spouses here much older and wiser than I can tell you that a perfect accord between husband and wife is the work of a lifetime. Though there may be bumps along the way, nevertheless the direction is clear, the operation of the unwritten law of Love. And so it will be between Christ and His Church.

SERMON – SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY – 15 JULY 2018

St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

Father Peter Joslyn

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“If I send them away fasting to their own houses,” Christ observes of the multitude, “they will faint by the way.” Understatement of all centuries. We have two options: refreshment in the wilderness by the gracious and transforming hands of our savior, or else starvation. Return and rest in the house of God. Be grafted into His vine. Leave off idolatry and the fruitlessness of iniquity. Let us render to Jesus Christ, our husband and our redeemer, the calves, that is, the sacrifices of our lips, of our souls and bodies—repentance, thanksgiving, and charity. With such fruit our God is well pleased, and the end is everlasting life. + Amen.