

“The Power of Compassion”

June 11, 2023

Scripture: Hosea 5:15-6:6; Matthew 9:10-13, 18-26

The ACLU is currently tracking nearly 500 anti-LGBTQ pieces of legislation in state governments across the country. They range from freedom of expression through restricting or prohibiting drag shows to denying access to gender-affirming healthcare for people under 18, effectively standing between parents and their children’s doctors. Now, that may seem like a completely irrelevant observation for a sermon on Sunday morning. Irrelevant on the one hand because it doesn’t seem like a scriptural or spiritual concern, and on the other because it may not affect most of us in any direct way. If these bills were being considered in New York for instance, which they are not, their enactment would not change anything in my life personally. And the same is probably true for most of you.

But as I’ve considered these readings today I’ve found myself gravitating toward this issue as an example of what happens when “sacrifice” or performative piety is elevated above compassion. In the reading in Hosea we encounter a people living on the edge of disaster. Political decisions are always consequential. In this case, King Jeroboam, whom Hosea is speaking to, inherited an alliance with the Assyrian Empire which his great-grandfather, King Jehu, had formed and thereby ensured peace and prosperity for Israel. Hosea believed this alliance was a rejection of the God of Israel, putting Israel in a position of subservience to Assyria that amounted to idolatry.

Apparently, based on the mock trial he imagines between God and the people, the prevailing belief was so long as they went through the motions of worship properly, God would be satisfied and their allegiance to Assyria was safe. But God’s response to their confidence should dispel that illusion: “What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes away early.” Hosea portrays God as skeptical of Israel’s devotion. Their prosperity under the protection of Assyria has seduced them into believing they are immune from God’s wrath.

And what does that prosperity look like? We don’t really get a picture of that from Hosea, but when we turn to a contemporary of his, to the prophet Amos, we can see what’s happening. Amos accuses these same people of neglecting and exploiting the poor: “Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying, ‘When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the Sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat.’” In other words, Amos accuses the people of prospering on the backs of the poor and going through the motions of piety only to resume cheating people as soon as the Sabbath ends.

Both Hosea and Amos claim the core problem for Israel is a lack of compassion. Amos focuses on the treatment of the poor while Hosea focuses more on Israel’s willingness to give up its values for security. Both are clear that Israel will pay a heavy price politically, but the most vulnerable, the poorest among them, will carry the heaviest burden.

Today much of the anti-LGBTQ legislation in the states is motivated by a twisted ideology called Christian nationalism. The people supporting it believe that God demands we sacrifice the most vulnerable people in our communities rather than extend them compassion and acceptance. They are directly opposed to the ministry of Jesus.

In Matthew's gospel we meet Jesus as he is beginning his ministry in the northern part of the country, the province of Galilee, near the town of Capernaum. He's just called a tax collector, named Matthew, to follow him and is now sitting in "the house," whose, we don't know, surrounded by his disciples and a gathering of other tax collectors and assorted sinners. When people identified as Pharisees see this, they're offended. In response Jesus quotes them that line from Hosea, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." The Hebrew word translated here as mercy and other places as steadfast love is *hesed*. *Hesed* is mostly a description reserved for God, such as in Psalm 103 where God is described as "merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love," abounding in *hesed*. But occasionally we are called to display *hesed*, such as in Micah, chapter 6, where we're called to "do justice, love kindness (*hesed*), and walk humbly with our God."

Over and over, God instructs the people to elevate compassion above piety. It's important to do both, but when our piety drives us to abandon compassion, then we've taken a very wrong turn. Compassion has the power to bring us into the presence of God. And anything we do to obscure it cuts off from God. Recently laws have been passed in Uganda in Africa criminalizing homosexuality and are driven by the same twisted ideology behind similar legislation here. One of the goals of Christian nationalism is to establish order in society by regulating gender identity through state governments. One result of that has been an increase in hate crimes against the LGBTQ community. These kinds of laws give permission to folks to indulge their worst impulses and lash out against people whose life condition they don't approve or makes them feel uncomfortable.

And I think that's the real harm. One question Jesus' response to his opponents raises for me is what is the effect on a society when compassion is discouraged? How is our collective soul damaged when we give license to bigotry and hatred through our laws or our interpretations of scripture? I suppose every society has a tendency to target its weakest members and single them out for discrimination and abuse. When Rome was burning under Emperor Nero, he expelled the Christians, blaming them for the destruction. It's not unusual when things feel uncertain or unstable for a group to become a scapegoat. So, I'm not surprised by the actions of some of our states' legislatures. But I am concerned about the cost to civility and trust their actions will have.

Prophets like Hosea weren't only interested in getting society right with God; I think they were also concerned that society get it right about God. What sort of a God did they think they worshiped if they believed their behavior was beyond reproach? What about God had they learned to convince them it was acceptable to go on treating their poor and vulnerable with such disdain? Later in the book Hosea would go to great lengths to illustrate God's displeasure, even so far as marrying a prostitute and naming his children "Without mercy" and "Not my people." I know! Hosea was pretty intense. But for him the stakes were enormous. He saw no other way to impress on them the gravity of how far they'd fallen.

Jesus took a different tack. Instead of constantly throwing their shortcomings up to them, he modeled the opposite. He welcomed those the religious elite rejected. He embodied the compassion he was calling them to embrace. So when a woman who was hurting, a woman whose life condition may have all but rendered her dead to those around her, dared to touch him he didn't recoil in horror but reached to her and called her "daughter." He commended her for her faith and through his compassion for her she was healed. He restored her life and then restored the life of a child who had actually died. The power of compassion knows no bounds.

That power can overcome the many forms of death we are seeing committed by frightened people who want to control the lives of others rather than see and know them. And the best way, the Jesus way, to do that is to model compassion in our own interactions. He challenges us to have the courage to put aside our own outrage and listen even to those whose views we abhor. We know compassion has the power to restore those who have been rejected back to community; we know that acceptance and full inclusion is the path for healing our relationship with our LGBTQ sisters and brothers. But it may also have the power to heal the hatred so many carry in their hearts toward those same sisters and brothers. Modeling the love Jesus lives, embracing the humanity of others, even when we deeply disagree with them, is the only way I know to move us beyond arguments and rhetoric and create real change.

In the end, I'm convinced that is the call of every prophet to their society and it must be the call we make to ours. Let the power of compassion heal us as we practice compassion in all that we do, and through us God will heal the world.

Amen