

Tenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Year A

Hos 6:3-6

Ps 50:1, 8, 12-13, 14-15

Rom 4:18-25

Mt 9:9-13

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A day would not go by without my saying the rosary. I would consider it symptomatic of something gone terribly wrong if I were to skip my morning or evening prayers. And yet, sometimes, if not oftentimes, I follow through on these pious routines with a sense of urgency rather than contemplation. I am guilty on the occasional day of getting my prayers in rather than allowing myself the proper time and place to be in my prayers. These good intentions are more a result of busy days filled with generous activity than disrespect or lack of desire to live more deeply through my faith and my prayer life. I cannot help but wonder if my anxious repetition of obligatory prayers is a way of keeping myself distant from God rather than giving myself over to his loving plan and the providence of His desire to transform me?

As human beings we like order. We like to have a game plan, to have lists and dates and times ordered in such a way that we can control our commitments and manage our responsibilities. Unfortunately, even our best intentions can get caught up in this impulse for organization. Our prayer life can become part of the routine; something rushed through in the car from one destination to the next like, catching up with phone calls on our cell phones. In this sense, our prayers can run the risk of becoming impediments to real communication with God, for when we squeeze in our prayer we get caught up in what we have to do, and leave very little room for what God wants to do.

In our first reading today, from the book of the Prophet Hosea, we hear the Lord speaking in the first person about his expectations of Israel:

What can I do with you, Ephraim? What can I do with you, Judah? Your piety is like a morning cloud, like the dew that early passes away. For this reason I smote them through the prophets, I slew them by the words of my mouth; for it is love that I desire, not sacrifice, and knowledge of God rather than holocausts.

The laws of Judaism were being kept faithfully, and the prophet refers to the observance of these laws as piety. And yet, what is apparently missing in this

practice is love. Here we see clearly the danger that religious practice, pious observance, can become spiritually dangerous if it does not lead to love and knowledge of God. The prophet warns the ancient Israelites, as he warns you and me today, that the practice of the precepts of faith is empty without the constancy of love.

And yet, in our human experience we sometimes find it easier to rely on our compliance with tangible regulations than to love as God call us to do. We seem to be easily inclined towards judgment rather than love. How simple is it to be drawn into a critical conversation about someone you know, someone you work with, or even someone you love, and how much more difficult is it to choose love over choosing to judge? This tension between natural inclinations and our Christian call to charity and love is what we struggle with throughout our lives at every stage. It is in our life with Jesus, through our moments of obedient prayer, that we recognize our weakness, our sin, and hand it over to the Lord to transform; growing in the knowledge of God and deepening our capacity to choose love always.

Tough stuff. Imagine what the world would look like if we all loved and let God do the judging? Our understanding would be challenged. We might be encouraged to see diversity as a reflection of the complexity of God's creation, rather than as a threat to our own limited world view. We might see in others what God sees in all people; the power and potential to change, grow, forgive, and be forgiven. Love is all these things. Sometimes piety can disguise itself as religion and allow judgment, prejudice, hatred and death to seem somehow in line with what it means to be Christian. If we say our prayers we console ourselves against our prejudice, if we go to church we cover our bases so we can justify policies which exclude the poor and the marginalized, if we fulfill our obligatory requirements we can pretend that we have done enough and ignore that perhaps our love does not equal our commitment.

Jesus shatters institutional expectations all the time. He breaks the Sabbath, talks with unclean women, and as in today's Gospel from Matthew, he shares a meal with those living outside the law. In other words, he chose love over piety in every encounter he had. Although he was Judge, although he was the Creator of the universe, he chose to come to his people as understanding and forgiveness. When asked by the Pharisees why he places his attention on those considered unworthy, he answers:

"Those who are well do not need a physician, but the sick do. Go and learn the meaning of the words, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' I did not come to call the righteous but sinners."

These readings are tough. They ask us to step out from the rules and ask ourselves the deeper question how well do we love, how well do we reflect the Lord? Our human condition attracts us to being more institutional than loving. We can hide behind rules and fail to evaluate the charity and depth our human relationships, our ability to forgive as we are forgiven. We can bolster ourselves with jurisprudence and consequently feel vindicated in our judgment, but when we

do we must admit that we block out the intention of God, the requirement of God, that above all else we must love. Rules are tidy well organized and strict in their boundaries; love is messy and vague, forcing us to deal with ambiguity and possibility. Yet love is what our Lord chose, love is his commandment.

We are fed by His body and blood. He transforms us through His Word and illuminates us with his Sacrament. Let us pray that in the end, when we are called before him, we can say >Yes Lord, I loved more deeply than anything else=. Let us pray that His Spirit will help us to live as He lived.