

only neurotic whining. The critical point is that the text does not so much "put down" Martha (who certainly is not a neurotic whiner) as it honors Mary's ministry of the word, a ministry Luke consistently elevates to a place of priority and sets alongside the ministry of the Samaritan. It is proper for a woman to leave the stereotypical role for that of a full and faithful disciple.

PROPER 12

Ordinary Time 17

*Sunday between
July 24 and 30 inclusive*

The series of texts from the preexilic prophets continues with Hos. 1:2-10, a passage that has intrigued and—in certain respects—baffled interpreters over the years. Although specific details are unclear, the larger import of the lection is quite evident: the relationship between God and Israel is similar to a marriage that has been ruined by an unfaithful spouse. Yahweh, who has patiently wooed, has been scorned by the object of the divine love, and the pain of judgment is at hand. Yet even in announcing this terrible verdict the prophet implants a reminder that Yahweh's final word is not destruction, but redemption.

Psalm 85 reveals a community of God's people who are suspended between the "already" and the "not yet." On the one hand, God's people are deeply aware of God's mercies in the past—mercies that have transformed the life of the community. On the other hand, there is a pressing need for some new outpouring of God's grace, some intervention in the lives of the people that will rescue them from their present peril. Precisely because of their experience of God's love in the past, they are now motivated to pray urgently for a fresh infusion of it. Their anxiety and concern are evident, yet even their very expectation of God's mercy results in peace.

The sequence of readings from Colossians moves to 2:6-15 (16-19). The passage begins by reminding the readers of this letter of the tradition concerning Christ in which they live. In remembering this tradition they are moved to thanksgiving, the appropriate response to their reception of Christ. After warning the readers against some unspecified danger, the author of Colossians returns to the nature of the relationship Christians have with Christ. There is no other force or personality that may compete with Christ, for Christ, and only Christ, embodies "the whole fullness of deity." Baptism is the means by which Christians are joined to Christ, and the evidence of this

union is the life of faith lived by Christ's persons. For Christians, faith and action are one.

Luke's interest in prayer is nowhere more evident than in the Gospel lection for this day, Luke 11:1-13. In response to the disciples' request, Jesus offers them a model prayer. The exclusively petitionary nature of this prayer becomes a vehicle for directing the attention of the disciples to their real needs, as well as reminding them of the only one ("Our Father") who may fulfill those needs. A parable and a brief observation on human nature contrast it with the nature of God. If those who are evil know how to do good things, just imagine what your heavenly Father is like!

Hosea 1:2-10

Sin, judgment, restoration. The full panoply of the divine-human drama is etched out in the lines of this brief passage, which continues the cycle of Old Testament readings from preexilic prophets.

The sin of the nation is characterized in vs. 2-3, a celebrated text which, although it presents formidable problems for the interpreter, is clear in its larger import. The reader feels an urge to protest God's command to the prophet that he marry a prostitute, even if—as is commonly assumed—Gomer is no common "lady of the night" but a cultic prostitute attached to a local Baal shrine. How could God order so repulsive a thing? How could any self-respecting worshiper of Yahweh comply? Some have suggested that Hosea married Gomer only later to discover that she was engaged in sacral or some other kind of prostitution. Another possibility is that "whoredom" is not a literal description of Gomer's activities but is, rather, a metaphor for idolatrous worship, as in 2 Kings 9:22. (Second Kings 9-10 contain another important parallel to Hos. 1; see below.) But the likely interpretation is that it was the very reprehensible nature of Hosea's action that caused it to be such an object lesson to the prophet's contemporaries. Hosea seems to have married Gomer knowing the full measure of her character, and this union is then transformed into a paradigm of God's relationship with Israel, a relationship that the nation has corrupted almost beyond recognition (compare Hos. 2:1-15).

The relation between 1:2-3 and 3:1-3 raises intriguing questions. Are Gomer and the unnamed woman of chapter 3 the same person? Some interpreters have understood that these are the same woman and that 3:1-3 is an autobiographical account of the same events that were described by a third party (a follower of Hosea?) in 1:2-3. But if

that is so, how can the sexual abstinence of 3:3 be reconciled with the three children born, according to 1:4-9, to Hosea and Gomer?

God's word of judgment on the nation (vs. 2-9) is vested in the names of the three children who are born to this scarred marriage: Jezreel (God Sows), Lo-ruhamah (Not Pitied), and Lo-ammi (Not My People). Of these three, Jezreel is the most intriguing, as it recalls the bloody events recounted in 2 Kings 9:1-10:11. A curious thing is that the prophet Elisha is portrayed in this latter text as condoning, in Yahweh's name, the massacre at Jezreel of the royal house of Israel (note 10:10), but Hosea cites these same events as evidence of the nation's sin (Hos. 1:4-5). Not only so, but the carnage inflicted by Jehu on Ahab's family will soon be imposed by Yahweh on the nation itself, a kingdom presently ruled by Jehu's descendant, Jeroboam II.

Not Pitied (v. 6) and Not My People (v. 9) are names of a different order from Jezreel in that, instead of pointing to the past, they indicate Yahweh's present activity: "I will no longer have pity . . ."; "You are not my people and I am not your God." Yahweh's patience is at an end and—not because Yahweh wishes it to be that way, but because there is now no alternative—the special ties binding this people to their God are about to be broken once and forever.

And yet . . . And yet . . .

Hosea understands as few do the essential nature of the God of Israel. This is a God whose very nature demands justice and fidelity, and who cannot tolerate a relationship from which these qualities are absent.

And yet . . . And yet . . .

These sinful people are Yahweh's people. They are persons of Yahweh's own choosing, connected by ties that can never be totally dissolved. Elsewhere (11:8; see Proper 13) Hosea expresses the anguish of a God who cannot ultimately let go even of those who repudiate God:

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.

And so, even when it appears that the final word of God's judgment has been spoken, there is still a further word of restoration (1:10): "In the place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' it shall be said to them, 'Children of the living God.' "

Now the full power of the family metaphor is felt. Like a spouse whose life has been turned to shambles by an unfaithful partner, Yahweh has grieved. Like a parent who cannot love his or her children into being the kind of persons they are capable of being, Yahweh recognizes a relationship of brokenness. But in the end, Yahweh—loving spouse, loving parent—will never turn loose. In the end, Yahweh—loving Creator, loving God—will finally redeem.

Psalm 85

It is a revealing observation about Ps. 85 that it was a major inspiration to both the contemplative Thomas à Kempis, who relied on it heavily in the third book of *The Imitation of Christ*, and the militant activist Oliver Cromwell, who found it “instructive and significant” as he proclaimed his intent that seventeenth-century England embody the reign of God on earth (see Rowland Prothero, *The Psalms in Human Life and Experience*; New York: E. P. Dutton, 1903, pp. 76–77, 190, 196). The impact of Ps. 85 is due in large part to vs. 8–13 and its striking portrayal of God’s promise of peace to God’s people, which, as James L. Mays suggests, is “an Old Testament form of the announcement ‘on earth peace among those with whom God is well pleased’ (Luke 2:14)” (*Psalms*, Interpretation series; Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, 1994).

The promise is delivered in the midst of current distress. Verse 1 looks back to a more “favorable” time when God “restored the fortunes of Jacob.” This latter phrase elsewhere is used to describe Israel’s return from the Babylonian exile (see, for example, Jer. 30:3, 18; 31:23; 33:7, 11; and Ezek. 39:25), and some would prefer to translate it here as “you returned Jacob from captivity.” Indeed, Ps. 85 makes very good sense as a corporate prayer for help in the early postexilic era. God had forgiven the people (vs. 2–3; see Isa. 40:1–2) and brought them home, but the glorious vision of Isa. 40–55 had not materialized. The prophet Haggai laments the people’s failure to rebuild the Temple; and using the same verb translated as “favorable” in Ps. 85:1, he suggests that this failure accounts for the lack of Yahweh’s favor in the early restoration era (520 B.C.; see Hag. 1:8, NRSV “take pleasure in”). Perhaps not coincidentally, the deficiencies Haggai detects are the very things promised in Ps. 85:8–13. The “glory” of God does not dwell in the Temple (Hag. 2:7, 9, NRSV “splendor”; compare Ps. 85:9). The land yields no “produce” (Hag. 1:10; compare Ps. 85:12, NRSV “increase”). There is no *shalom* (Hag.

2:9, NRSV “prosperity”; compare Ps. 85:8, 10, NRSV “peace”). In short, Ps. 85 could well have originated as a prayer of the people amid the disappointing circumstances of the early postexilic era (see also Zech. 1:12–17). The people had recently been restored (Ps. 85:1), but soon found themselves again in need of restoration (v. 4).

In terms of the above scenario, the relatively rapid change of fortune that necessitated the petitions of vs. 4–7 is not really surprising in light of Israel’s history. For instance, shortly after the deliverance from Egypt, the people’s idolatry necessitates Moses’ prayer that God “turn from your fierce wrath” (Ex. 32:12; compare Ps. 85:3, 5). Moses’ petition is accompanied by his reminder to God of the promise of land (Ex. 32:13; compare the promise in Ps. 85:8–13, noting especially the mention of “land”/“ground” in vs. 9, 11, and 12). God does indeed “turn,” allowing the people to live and finally revealing the divine character to consist of “steadfast love and faithfulness” (Ex. 34:6; compare Ps. 85:7, 10, 11).

The affinities between Ex. 32–34 and Ps. 85 are not intended to suggest another historical setting for the origin of the psalm, but rather to demonstrate that Ps. 85 is an appropriate prayer in a variety of circumstances. While the phrase “restored the fortunes of Jacob” suggests the likelihood of a postexilic prayer, the phrase can indicate more generally any “reversal of Yahweh’s judgment” (John Bracke, “šûb šebût: A Reappraisal,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 97 [1985]: 242). Like Ps. 126 (see the Fifth Sunday in Lent), which also contains the phrase “restored the fortunes” in its first verse and then petitions for further restoration (v. 4; compare Ps. 85:4), Ps. 85 is perpetually appropriate for the people of God. Our own sinfulness and shortsightedness, as well as the difficulties of living faithfully in a world pervaded by the results of faithlessness, mean that it will always be necessary for us, like Israel, to pray, “Restore us again” (v. 4; see Mark 9:24).

The gifts prayed for in vs. 4–7—“steadfast love” and “salvation”—are promised in vs. 8–13. God’s “salvation is at hand” (v. 9), and “steadfast love” is one of the four personified attributes in v. 10. In a sense, the gifts are conditional; God’s “salvation is at hand for those who fear” God (v. 9). But in another sense, the remarkable description in vs. 10–13 exceeds any possibility of human merit or accomplishment. The focus is clearly on God’s character and activity. “Steadfast love” and “faithfulness” are at the heart of God’s character (Ex. 34:6–7); “righteousness” is the fundamental policy God enacts as sovereign of the universe (Pss. 96:13; 97:2; 98:9); and the result is “peace” (Ps. 29:11; see Isa. 60:17). God’s character and

activity will fill the universe—from “ground” to “sky” (v. 11). The word “righteousness” occurs three times (vs. 10, 11, 13), and the effect is to affirm that God *will* set things right.

Like Ps. 77 (see Proper 8), Ps. 85 left Israel and leaves us waiting expectantly, but the waiting itself affords us peace, albeit “not . . . as the world gives” (John 14:27). As we wait, we pray with the psalmist, “Restore us again” (v. 4). And we pray as Jesus taught us, “Your kingdom come” (Luke 11:2). Our waiting is not passive but active, for also like Ps. 77, Ps. 85 calls us to a decision. As Mays suggests (*Psalms*), Ps. 85 finally “is a judgment on any easy satisfaction with life under the conditions created by human character and a summons to look for and pray for the time and life created by the character of God.”

Colossians 2:6–15 (16–19)

This lection opens with what appears to be an innocuous statement that Christians “have received Christ Jesus the Lord” (v. 6), but the Greek verb translated “received” (*paralambanein*) elsewhere refers to the reception of tradition (see, for example, 1 Cor. 11:2, 23; 15:1). Since the section that precedes this reading concerns the ministry of Paul and his continued presence with the community, the reception of Christ Jesus probably refers specifically to the reception of tradition *about* him.

Far from a static understanding of tradition as a collection of historical particulars and constraints, however, the tradition of Christ is something in which Christians live: “Continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving” (vs. 6–7). The multiplication of images here reveals something of the importance the writer attaches to being “in him.” Believers are rooted in Christ, suggesting their origin and the source of their nurture. They are also “built up” in Christ, suggesting their continued growth and development. To be “established” in the faith connotes their security, as “established” or “confirmed” derives from legal language about certainty or security. All of this imagery gives way to thanksgiving, which is the sole proper response to the reception of Christ Jesus in one’s life.

From this opening reminder of the many ways in which believers are connected with Jesus Christ, the writer issues a warning in v. 8. Exactly who or what threatens to take the Colossians “captive through philosophy and empty deceit” remains a much-disputed question, and the commentaries can provide an introduction to that

discussion. Perhaps speculation about the nature of the universe, such as is found in later Gnostic writings, already has emerged in this area, accompanied by claims that self-denial enhances knowledge (see 2:16–19). Whatever the precise nature of the threat, for the writer of Colossians it constitutes “human tradition” as against the Christian tradition alluded to in v. 6. Moreover, it is associated with the “elemental spirits of the universe,” those powerful beings who battle with God for mastery over the created order.

The remainder of the reading returns to the relationship between Christians and Christ, emphasizing first of all the excellence of the Christ as distinct from other rulers and authorities. The “whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” in him (v. 9). Whatever the relationship between this assertion and later christological formulations, here the assertion appears to distinguish Christ from any competing figures. Unlike the rulers and authorities of v. 10, or the elemental spirits and human tradition of v. 8, Christ partakes of God fully rather than partially.

In addition, as v. 10 indicates, Christians “have come to fullness in him.” What the writer means by this unusual expression becomes clearer in vs. 11–14, which detail the identification between Christ and believers.

First, believers “were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision” (v. 11). Perhaps as much as any other line in Colossians, this one raises questions about Pauline authorship, for it is difficult to imagine that the Paul who argues against the necessity of circumcision would assert the imperative of spiritual circumcision (note especially the language of v. 13: “the uncircumcision of your flesh”). Whatever the judgment about that question, here spiritual circumcision means “putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ.” That is, as circumcision serves as the primary identity marker of Jewish males, so spiritual circumcision identifies Christians as belonging to Christ.

Verses 12–14 amplify this claim by detailing the ways in which Christians are joined with Christ. They are “buried with him in baptism” and “raised with him through faith.” This resurrection consists of forgiveness, which Colossians describes as a clearing of the record. The graphic language of v. 14 makes the point well: the record is erased, set aside, nailed to the cross.

Verse 15 takes the action of the crucifixion and resurrection a step farther. Here it concerns, not forgiveness of the individual, but the disarming of “the rulers and authorities,” of whom God made a “public example” and over whom he has triumphed. At first this statement seems a digression, but in two ways it provides a fitting

conclusion to the thought of this lection. First, the disarming of "the rulers and authorities" means that Christians may live without fear of once again being captured by sin, so this final stage in the action of the cross secures the present and future for believers. Second, reference here to the "rulers and authorities" recalls v. 10 and its insistence that Christ is the one—the only one—in whom God fully dwells.

Perhaps the most important feature of this passage derives from its understanding of the relationship between Christ and the believer. Despite a rich theological heritage that teaches otherwise, Christians persist in understanding behavior as a means to a final reward (or as a means of warding off judgment!). Clearly reflecting earlier Pauline tradition, the writer of Colossians articulates an almost organic relationship between faith and action: faith and action are one. They are so precisely because believers are united in and with Christ, whose own experience shapes their lives. It is not incidental that the phrases "in him" and "with him" occur several times in this passage (vs. 9, 10, 11, 12, 13), for that identification in and with him forms the basis for Christian life.

Luke 11:1–13

The thematic thrust of Luke's travel narrative concerns Jesus' destiny at Jerusalem and his instruction to his followers in the meaning of discipleship. It is not surprising that a crucial piece of the instruction has to do with prayer, since Luke of all the Gospels has the most extensive material and vocabulary on prayer. Jesus prays regularly and at critical moments in his ministry (for example, 3:21; 6:12; 9:18, 28; 10:21; 11:1; 22:32, 41; 23:34, 46). Prayer also becomes a mark of true discipleship, something that distinguishes the followers of Jesus from others. At the outset of their mission, the Seventy are told to petition the Lord of the harvest for divinely sent workers (10:2).

According to the texts assigned for this Sunday, the indispensability of prayer emerges from the fact that it puts those who pray in touch with the incredible generosity of God. "Successful prayer" depends not on the methods or strategies of the disciples (what time of day one prays or the posture one assumes), but on a listening Father, to whom petitioners are constantly referred.

It all begins with Jesus at prayer—something that prompts the disciples to ask for instruction, no doubt with the implication that Jesus' teaching will differ from John's teaching (11:1). What the

disciples receive is first a model prayer (11:2–4), then a parable that by contrast stresses the character of God (vs. 5–8), and finally reassurance that, as their heavenly Father, God will answer the petitions of God's children and grant the Holy Spirit (vs. 9–13).

Little needs to be said here about the model prayer, since books and books have been written about its meaning and implications. Two observations, however, are important for the understanding of the rest of the passage. First, God is addressed as "Father," and thus the disciples are invited to pray with the same familiarity that Jesus prayed (10:21). The fact that the one to whom they pray can be thought of in such an intimate way markedly affects the confidence with which they offer their prayers (see 11:13).

Second, the model prayer is exclusively petitionary. It contains no adoration, thanksgiving, or confession, only five requests for God to do something. The disciples are being taught what their real needs are and to whom they need to go for satisfaction. God in turn is being asked to fulfill the promises previously made regarding God's name and reign and regarding the care and protection of God's people.

The parable that follows (vs. 5–8) makes sense only in light of the high value placed on hospitality in the Middle Eastern culture. Many people traveled, but most of the inns were disreputable, often brothels or places where magic was practiced. Travelers had to depend on friends or friends of friends for lodging along the way. The parable itself may well be in the form of a question, paraphrased like this: "Which of you will go to your next-door neighbor at midnight and ask to borrow bread for an unexpected guest and be turned down?" The anticipated answer would be, "Why, none of us. We don't have unresponsive neighbors. It is unthinkable that a request like that would be denied."

But the neighbor has excuses. In unbolting the door, he is bound to wake up the children, and there goes his rest. The narrator adds, "I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence [*anaideia*] he will get up and give him whatever he needs" (v. 8).

The problem is that there is no hint in the parable that the one who had the unexpected guest arrive pestered his neighbor into providing bread (as the persistent widow did in the parable in 18:1–8). We are not told that he pounded on the door or called repeatedly. He made a reasonable, not-out-of-the-ordinary request. Thus the Greek word *anaideia* (not found anywhere else in the New Testament) should probably be given its other meaning "shamelessness" or "avoidance of shame." The neighbor finally responded, not because he was badgered, but because he feared the shame that would

accompany his refusal. People in the community would talk if he denied a plea for help regarding hospitality. Better to risk waking the children than to have to face the reproaches of the villagers when they heard he had refused a request.

God, then, is contrasted with the unfriendly neighbor. If the neighbor who is initially prone to refuse requests finally responds to avoid shame, how much more will God respond to the pleas of the people of God? God can be trusted. Ask, search, knock, for God is not reluctant or hesitant. "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (11:13).

Prayer is rooted in the kindness and generosity of God, thus making it possible for even unworthy, stumbling disciples to offer petitions for their journey. What they receive is the Spirit, the ultimate resource for mission.

PROPER 13

Ordinary Time 18

*Sunday between July 31
and August 6 inclusive*

Those who are tempted to believe that the Old Testament is concerned primarily with judgment (while the New Testament is about grace) will be disabused of such illusions by today's Old Testament lection, Hos. 11:1-11. There is no more poignant portrayal of the agony of God, who is torn between the demands of judgment and of grace. The images of both parent and spouse are used to emphasize the love of God, a love that is continually spurned by a sinful people. Yet the God of Israel cannot come to the point of destroying finally and irredeemably, for such a step would violate God's essential nature. When justice and grace are weighed in God's balances, grace always prevails.

Psalm 107:1-9, 43 is a song of thanksgiving over the *hesed* of Yahweh, God's "steadfast love." As such it forms an appropriate companion to the Hosea lection. Israel's experience of exile seems presupposed by this psalm, yet the language is such as to apply to many experiences of alienation. Lostness, hunger, thirst, and weariness characterize the condition of those cut off from God, yet if they seem abandoned, they are not. For God has guided them out of the desert and back to their homes once again. Their praise becomes an important climax in this paradigm of all human redemption.

The freedom to live in goodness might be characterized as the subject of the Epistle text, Col. 3:1-11. Even among the earliest Christians there were those who understood their faithfulness to Christ chiefly in terms of what they should not do. The author of Colossians (probably a pupil of Paul) seeks to correct this, however, by demonstrating the liberty of the baptized life. Although rejecting a pie-in-the-sky mentality, the passage points readers beyond "things that are on earth" to "things that are above." And it is in this spiritual freedom that they are to reject such things as fornication, impurity, and the like, and be clothed with a new self—renewal in the image of the Creator! In this way, all artificial distinctions among persons will cease to exist.