

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.

Freedom from greed is the focus of Luke 12:13–21, a text that addresses the difficult issue of how the Christian is to deny the temptations of materialism while living in a very material world. The parable is so transparent as to need almost no comment, for it basically points to the error of falsely trusting in material possessions to provide human security. The farmer is not condemned because he worked to produce a bumper crop, but his demise is viewed as tragic because he wrongly believed that his bulging barns would be his salvation.

Hosea 11:1–11

It is tempting to caricature the prophets of ancient Israel as individuals of enormous anger. Because they are so often associated with words of judgment and destruction, a superficial reading of the prophets' message may lead one to the unfortunate conclusion that these spokespersons for God were motivated primarily by rage against those to whom they preached. Yet if one is enticed into such a misconception, the declarations of Hosea serve to dispel it, for Hosea agonized over the fate of his nation and suffered enormous pain as he described Israel's destructive waywardness before God. As one reads the text, it becomes clear that Hosea's pain is nothing other than the pain of God.

If the lection for this day says anything (and it says much!), it brings the prophet's agony, and that of Yahweh, into sharpest focus.

The image of Yahweh's love for Israel as that of a parent for a child (Hos. 11:1–4) strikes familial chords similar to those struck by Hosea's image of marital love (1:2–10, Proper 12). Yet the tone is different here, for while both images stress the faithlessness of the one who breaks the relationship, 11:1–4 emphasizes the helplessness of the beloved. If Yahweh had not loved Israel and nurtured it, Israel would not even have survived. Yet the tragic irony is that

The more I called them,
the more they went from me.
(V. 2)

There are few scenes of tenderness in the Bible that match vs. 3–4. The rearing of infants has many aspects that are universally the same, regardless of temporal or cultural circumstances, and the parental love demonstrated in these lines can be understood with

empathy by readers everywhere. Yet the beloved child is ultimately to repudiate the parent who has lavished such enormous affection.

(It is important in interpreting both this text and the Hosea passage from Proper 12 that one not overemphasize the element of gender. Just as it is possible for husbands as well as wives to prostitute themselves, so fathers, like mothers, are capable of nurturing love for their children. Yet the unspoken implication in 11:1–4 is that Yahweh is like a *mother* in her devotion to her child, and thus this passage stands as a fine corrective to the frequent tendency of interpreters to portray God in exclusively masculine terms.)

Verses 5–7 describe the inevitable consequence of the nation's faithlessness. "They shall return to the land of Egypt" of v. 5 refers back to "out of Egypt I called my son" of v. 1, and thus is to be understood as a symbolic (Egypt = bondage) rather than a descriptive statement. The descriptive declaration follows in the reference to Assyria, for in 722 B.C., not many years after Hosea was active in the Northern Kingdom, that nation fell to the advancing Assyrian armies. The reason for the destruction is clear: "They have refused to return to me."

(Verse 7 is typical of much of the Hebrew text of Hosea, in that part of it is so garbled as to defy logical translation. "To the Most High they call . . ." does not make much sense in the present context, and one may wish to consult other translations to note how very differently the text of this verse is reconstructed. If one has a translation with marginal notations, one may also note the frequency with which acknowledgment is made that a given translation is conjectural. Scholars have ventured many explanations for the difficult state of the Hebrew text of Hosea, but no completely satisfactory answers have been put forward.)

More moving than vs. 1–4 (if that is possible) are the emotions expressed in vs. 8–9. Perhaps the parental (maternal) image of vs. 1–4 is still operative here, although that is not stated. What is clear is that Yahweh, a God of compassion and mercy, cannot come to the point of completely destroying Israel. The lover, the parent, draws back from the horror of it all and, having placed judgment and mercy in the balance, decides in favor of mercy. And why is it that Yahweh's compassion ultimately wins out over Yahweh's justice? The answer defies all logic: that's just the way Yahweh is.

I am God and no mortal,
the Holy One in your midst.
and I will not come in wrath.
(V. 9)

And so God's people will be spared in spite of the judgment to come, a judgment they deserve very much.

(Admah and Zeboiim of v. 8 are cities that shared the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, Deut. 29:23.)

A final section, vs. 10–11, is unclear in many of its details. (Why is it that "his children shall come trembling from the west," since neither Egypt nor Assyria lay in a westerly direction from Israel?) But its focal point is the final line. Those whom Yahweh has exiled shall finally return to their homes, and (so the implication is) to their God. Thus mercy has prevailed, although the sinfulness of the people has brought needless suffering and destruction into their lives.

Hosea stands as a reminder that judgment exacts a price from the one who is judged as well as from the one who does the judging. The sin of the people has brought suffering on them, but Yahweh suffers too! So all mistaken images of the prophet motivated by rage, all mistaken images of a God whose basic emotion is anger (à la Marcion), are cast aside by Hosea. The suffering God of Hosea anticipates the suffering Christ of Gethsemane and of Calvary's cross.

Psalm 107:1–9, 43

Psalm 107 features in a particularly impressive way the word *hesed*, "steadfast love," which is a central theological concept in the book of Psalms and throughout the Old Testament. Psalm 107 begins and ends with the mention of "steadfast love," and one of the psalm's two refrains highlights it as well (vs. 8, 15, 21, 31). In a sense, it may be helpful to think about Ps. 107 as a sermon on God's "steadfast love," beginning with an invitation for congregational participation (vs. 1–3), followed by four narrative illustrations (vs. 4–9, 10–16, 17–22, 23–32), and concluding with hymnlike praise based on the four illustrations (vs. 33–42) and an admonition to continue to pay attention to the message of God's "steadfast love" (v. 43). As a whole, Ps. 107 effectively conveys what God's "steadfast love" is all about—compassion for people in need, including forgiveness, because the distress is sometimes the result of human sinfulness (see vs. 11, 17).

Most scholars categorize Ps. 107 as a song of thanksgiving and suggest that an original version of it (vs. 1, 4–32) may have been sung as persons offered thanksgiving sacrifices in the Temple (v. 22). These scholars further propose that Ps. 107 was expanded by the addition of vs. 2–3, 33–43 in order to be more immediately relevant

to the postexilic generations who actually had been "redeemed from trouble and gathered in from the lands" (vs. 2–3), and were even known as "The Redeemed of the LORD" (Isa. 62:12). Support for this proposal is found in the placement of Ps. 107, which opens Book V of the Psalter. Not only does Ps. 107 appear to respond directly to Ps. 106:47, which presupposes an exilic situation, but it also appears to respond to the concluding psalm of Book III, especially its question, "Lord, where is your steadfast love of old . . . ?" (Ps. 89:49). If, as Gerald Wilson suggests, Books I–III document the failure of the Davidic covenant (see above on Ps. 99, Last Sunday After Epiphany, and Ps. 96, Proper 4), then it is particularly significant that the heart of Book IV affirms the reign of God (Ps. 93–99) and that Book V begins by defining God's sovereignty in terms of compassion and forgiveness—in a word, *hesed*. (See "The Use of Royal Psalms at the 'Seams' of the Psalter," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 35 [1986]: 92.)

The lection includes only the first of the four narrative illustrations of God's "steadfast love" (Ps. 107:4–9), but these verses are sufficient to demonstrate the possibilities for hearing Ps. 107 and for discerning its theological significance. Verses 4–5 could refer to any experience of being lost in a desert and confronted with life-threatening hunger and thirst. When those in this situation "cried to the LORD" (v. 6a), the Lord "delivered them" (v. 6b) by leading them back to civilization (v. 7). The experience is cause for gratitude and celebration of God's "steadfast love" (v. 8), and it illustrates how God's "steadfast love" takes concrete form in provision for the needy (v. 9).

While it is possible to hear vs. 4–9 as the experience of any person or group, it is also difficult not to hear allusions to Israel's experiences of exodus and return from exile. Both involved wandering (Ps. 95:10; Isa. 35:8; NRSV "go astray") in a "desert" (Ex. 15:22; 16:1; Isa. 40:3) or in a "waste" (Deut. 32:10; Ps. 78:40; Isa. 43:19–20). Both involved hunger (Ex. 16:3; Isa. 49:10) and thirst (Ex. 17:3; Isa. 41:17) that was filled or satisfied by God (Ex. 16:12; Isa. 55:2). Both involved God's leading in God's way (Ex. 3:18; 5:3, NRSV "journey"; Isa. 11:15; 48:17), and both could be described or anticipated as "wonderful works" (Ex. 3:20, NRSV "wonders"; Micah 7:15, NRSV "marvelous things"). In short, even if Ps. 107:4–9 originated in the experience of "some" people (v. 4), these verses were easily adaptable to corporate experiences of deliverance such as exodus and return from exile.

The possibility that vs. 4–9 originated in the experience of "some" and were claimed by the whole people (or simply the fact that vs. 4–9 are applicable to a variety of experiences) is itself theologically significant, for it suggests that scripture is a "living word that is not

exhausted in an ancient setting nor does it require the repetition of history to become valid again, but runs freely, challenging a new generation of believers to see a fresh correspondence between word and experience" (Leslie Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, Word Biblical Commentary 21; Waco, Tex.: Word, 1983, p. 65). Psalm 107 suggests that there are certain "typical" things we can count on as we look for fresh correspondence between our experience and God's word and work. In conjunction with the other three narrative illustrations, vs. 4–9 suggest the essential weakness, neediness, and sinfulness of humanity. Those who are "wise" and "give heed to these things" (v. 43)—that is, to the message of the four narrative illustrations—will realize that there is never a time when they are not in "trouble" (vs. 2, 6, 13, 19, 28). In contrast to what our culture teaches us, Ps. 107 teaches us that there is finally no such thing as self-sufficiency (see Luke 12:13–21, the Gospel lesson for the day). Human life depends on God; and the good news is, God can be depended on. God is "good" (v. 1), and God shares God's goodness (v. 9). It is God's character to love humankind steadfastly. We Christians profess that the steadfast love of God was revealed most clearly in the cross of Jesus Christ, who for us is "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:24; see Ps. 107:43). The cross makes it clear that God chooses the weak and the foolish and the low, which means that no one should "boast in the presence of God" (1 Cor. 1:26–29). Rather, the fundamental attitude and activity of the faithful will be gratitude, to which Ps. 107 repeatedly invites us: "O give thanks to the LORD" (v. 1; see vs. 8, 15, 21, 31).

Colossians 3:1–11

By some peculiar chemistry, religious conviction regularly finds itself reduced to a constrictive way of life, so that some religious folk give the impression that to be Christian is to be dour, moralistic, and generally unhappy. The historical circumstances that gave rise to Colossians are much disputed, but it seems clear in Col. 2:20–23 that already in the first century some people understood their faith in just such a confined way. The writer of the letter (probably a student of Paul's rather than Paul himself) warns about regulations that *appear* to promote wisdom, but whose piety and self-abasement actually contradict the gospel (see 2:18 with its reference to self-abasement). By way of introduction he asks, "Why do you live as if you still belonged to the world?" (v. 20). Colossians 3:1–11 offers an alternative to the narrow, self-promoting piety that masquerades as faith-

fulness but actually conforms to a worldly standard. Here the author sketches out an understanding of the new life that follows baptism, offering specifics, to be sure, but grounding those in a central affirmation about the Christian's liberating relationship to Jesus Christ.

The lection opens by recalling the earlier comments about baptism in 2:12: in baptism believers are both buried with Christ and raised with him. Here what comes into focus are the consequences of that resurrected life. If readers of Colossians recall the difficulties that arose at Corinth precisely *because* believers understood themselves to be living out the resurrection (see Paul's careful wording in Rom. 6), they will rightly wonder whether we have here an overly optimistic understanding of the nature of Christian life. Colossians 3:3b–4, however, protects against such a conclusion, for the true life of a Christian is "hidden with Christ in God," and its glory will be revealed with his in the last day. If the resurrection of Christians is real in the present, it is not yet complete.

Those raised with Christ will "seek the things that are above" and not "things that are on earth" (vs. 1–2). Statements like this one sometimes elicit concerns that the New Testament is otherworldly in its preoccupations, to the exclusion of any concern for what happens here and now. To put it bluntly, does Colossians advocate a kind of pie-in-the-sky mentality, in which all that matters is the future heavenly life of the believer?

The specifics of vs. 5–11 indicate that the answer to that question is firmly negative. "Things that are on earth" (v. 2) and the putting to death of "earthly" things (v. 5) have to do with some particular and distorted attitudes of human beings, attitudes controlled and governed by a perverted set of values, not with human life in general.

In vs. 5–11 two specific kinds of instructions are offered. First, in v. 5, the writer warns against "fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry)." The physical—and indeed, sexual—nature of several of these prohibitions is noteworthy. It may stretch the warning just a bit to say that the concern here is with behavior that is overt, behavior that others might witness. Even evil desire and greed sometimes manifest themselves in actions that are visible. The equation of greed with idolatry merits notice, for it astutely assumes that greed exists where God has been replaced by other "deities" such as possessions, power, or one's own pleasure.

If the specific instructions of v. 5 generally address external, observable behavior, those of vs. 8–9 might be said to address behavior that is less available for others to observe: "anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language" (v. 8) and lying (v. 9). As the

heirs of Freud and Jung, we recognize that hostile emotions and attitudes often exist in ways of which we are unaware ourselves, which of course makes controlling them exceedingly difficult. Because the exhortation against lying in v. 9 specifically refers to the way in which Christians treat one another, what the writer has in view here may be the impact of such attitudes within the Christian community. Disputes and conflicts that fester produce just such behavior, which is highly destructive of community life.

Along with these ethical instructions, the author includes a warning (v. 6) and a reminder (vs. 9b-11). The warning about the "wrath of God" that is coming anticipates a final judgment, when all are held accountable for their practices. The reminder, however, suggests that Christians have already been changed in ways that should remove them from the fear of God's final wrath.

Believers have already "stripped off the old self" and have been clothed with the "new self" (vs. 9b-10). As the commentaries will explain, this passage probably draws on an early Christian baptismal liturgy, with its notion of putting off the old clothing and taking on new clothing, the new self that is nothing less than "the image of its creator" (v. 10).

The final verse, which of course recalls Gal. 3:28 and 1 Cor. 12:13, conjures up the many divisions human beings create among themselves, only to dismiss them. Whether ethnic (Greek and Jew), religious (circumcised and uncircumcised), cultural (barbarian, Scythian), or economic (slave and free), the walls that divide humankind have no place in the renewed humanity that follows from the resurrection. (Importantly, the author of Colossians does not include gender divisions here.) If "Christ is all and in all," then such subsidiary and competing identifications can only be rejected.

Luke 12:13-21

There are few areas in the lives of modern Christians where help is needed more than in the matter of material possessions. Members of congregations may be familiar with stewardship appeals during the particular season of the year when pledges are solicited, but they very rarely find themselves confronted with the other passages in the Bible that speak to the threat and temptation that material possessions pose. The fact that many North American congregations have greatly benefited from the gifts of the wealthy makes ministers a bit reluctant to tackle the ominous texts that raise serious questions

about the amassing of riches. What if the big givers are offended by what the Bible says?

Yet it is also true that many church members want help in discerning how they earn, invest, and spend their money. They live in a capitalistic culture that thrives on the profit motive and puts a high premium on expansion and growth. At the same time, they read in their Bibles about the condemnation of avarice, one of the seven deadly sins. How does one distinguish the profit motive from greed? Or how does one function (that is, earn a living, raise a family, live responsibly) in a society that values people in terms of what they possess, and where the accumulation of money is the quickest access to power? The latter question becomes a particularly urgent issue when one is faced with the loss of a job and the accompanying sense of failure and valuelessness.

Both this Sunday and next, the assigned Gospel lessons provide occasions for reflection on the meaning of possessions, and it is particularly appropriate to do so in the context of thinking about the larger issue of discipleship (one of the thematic foci of Luke's travel narrative). The Gospel texts are not immediately addressed to the broader culture, to provide a blueprint for an economic system that is peculiarly Christian. They in fact are addressed to disciples and would-be disciples, who have little or no leverage to change economic patterns but who want to live faithfully to their calling as believers. Jesus' words make sense only in the circle of faith where the intrusion of God into the lives of people (as with the rich man in the parable) is taken seriously.

The manner in which the nameless person in the crowd interrupts Jesus to ask that he adjudicate a family dispute over inheritance is abrupt (Luke 12:13). In an instant the topic changes from solemn encouragement to disciples to remain steadfast in their confessions of faith (12:4-12) to what seems like a trivial concern—except that Jesus makes it more than trivial. Though he refuses to be the arbitrator, Jesus warns the person who made the request of two things (constantly be on guard against all kinds of greed and know that your life does not consist of what you possess), and then tells a forceful parable.

The initial warnings are indirect. The person asking for arbitration is not immediately condemned for being greedy, nor is he chided for having abruptly changed the subject. Instead, he is instructed to set up a perpetual watch against the variety of ways greed operates in human life. (The imperative "Be on guard" is a present tense.) Greed (*pleonexia*, literally "the yearning to have

more") is insidious and results in idolatry (see Col. 3:5). Furthermore, life is more than possessions. As a divine gift, it is valued in other ways than by the size of bank accounts and stock portfolios.

The parable is powerful and needs little explanation. It pushes the whole issue of possessions a step farther by depicting the tragedy of trusting in false security. The rich fool is not guilty of greed; his acreage simply produces a bumper crop. His problem is the misguided illusion that his prosperity has secured the future. He feels amply supplied "for many years." But then in the midst of a conversation he is having with himself, God interrupts to inform him that death is on its way. One whose whole speech has been delivered in the first person ("I will do this and that") is left with the rhetorical question, "And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"

Now the text does not prescribe specific answers to our questions about possessions. It does not provide rules that define how much is "enough" and what people should do with their wealth if they have some. The reader hunts in vain for a guideline, a principle, a quantifiable definition of greed that will tell one whether he or she has stepped over the line. The text does not offer a new law, but it does confront the reader with eloquent language and powerful symbols that continue to prod the imagination. To be constantly on guard against greed, to be reminded that life is a gift of God and not a hard-earned acquisition, to be warned vividly against the presumption that affluence can secure the future—these are more than rules.

PROPER 14

Ordinary Time 19

*Sunday between
August 7 and 13 inclusive*

Both the lesson from Isa. 1 and the selection from Ps. 50 call the people of God to "Hear!" (Isa. 1:10; Ps. 50:7). In each case, the message has to do with sacrifices and burnt offerings: God does not want them! This apparent rejection of one of the hallmarks of Israel's liturgical life should not be interpreted as an outright rejection of worship. Rather, it seems that the sacrificial system had come to be understood as a means of attempting to manipulate God for self-centered purposes, and the texts therefore call for worship that is God-centered (Ps. 50:14–15, 23) and prepares the worshiper to enact God's will (Isa. 1:16–17). Both texts conclude with a promise and a warning, thus emphasizing the importance of the decision involved to honor God and God's purposes rather than self (Isa. 1:18–20; Ps. 50:22–23).

The Gospel lesson also calls the people of God to decision. As in Isa. 1 and Ps. 50, this call to decision is based on the good news that God rules the world and offers people a share in this reign (Luke 12:32; see Isa. 1:2–3; Ps. 50:1–6). Unlike the rich man who trusts only himself and acts only in his own self-interest (Luke 12:16–21), the people of God are invited to "sell . . . and give" as a sign of their trust in God and God's reign (Luke 12:33–34). The juxtaposition of vs. 32–34 with the call to "be dressed . . . be ready" (vs. 35, 40) suggests that our use of financial resources is inextricably related to our conviction that the future and our destiny lie ultimately with God. What we believe about the future affects how we live in the present.

This affirmation is precisely the message of Heb. 11. The entrusting of one's life and future to God is "the reality of things hoped for, the proof of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1; for this translation, see the commentary on the Epistle lection for this Sunday). There is no better example of this affirmation than the story of Abraham and Sarah (Heb. 11:8–16). The message of the four lessons may be