

31 May 2015

The Story of the Father
Hosea 11:1-9

Jesus always referred to God as “Father” and encouraged us to do the same, but perhaps the best description of God in the parental role comes from Hosea, chapter 11, where God speaks to his rebellious children, Israel”

Hosea 11:1-9.
*When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.
The more I called them, the more they went from me;
they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols.
Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms;
but they did not know that I healed them.
I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love.
I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks.
I bent down to them and fed them.
They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king,
because they have refused to return to me.
The sword rages in their cities, it consumes their oracle-priests,
and devours because of their schemes.
My people are bent on turning away from me. To the Most High they call,
but he does not raise them up at all.
How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?
How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim?
My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.
I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim;
for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst,
and I will not come in wrath.*

Before there was anything, before there was even anywhere to put anything, before there was time itself, there was the Father. Since our own minds exist within the confines of time and space, there is no way really for us to understand or explain a reality that is beyond our reality, but today on the day that the Church has designated “Trinity Sunday,” we shall try anyway. First, let’s give the Father a name. The Hebrew people had a name for the Father, spelled out around the letters Y-H-V-H, but they long ago decided that it was disrespectful even to say that name aloud, so we don’t know how to pronounce the Father’s Hebrew name. That makes it not very useful for a sermon, so let me use the name I introduced last week, Matua, which in the Maori language means “father” but also refers to the One Father.

Here is what we know about Matua: his essence is love. Matua is pure, fierce, vast, and focused love. Our own faltering, fickle attempts at love pale beside the love of Matua, but if we hope to understand the Father at all, thinking about love is still the best we can do. We only understand Matua by loving, and as our love for others grows, so too does our understanding of Love himself. Now the thing about love is that love does not exist alone. Love requires another, someone else toward whom to give oneself, which is why we cannot really talk about Matua as

being only One. As long as Matua has been, which is as long as there is, there have been those whom Matua has loved and who have loved in return. In our own stammering speech, we describe two others who have existed eternally in love with Matua. We speak of a Spirit of fire and wind – in Hebrew *Ruah* – and we speak of an Eternal Son of Wisdom and Grace. So Matua has always loved in this circle of joy. But there is more. Love, by its nature, expands. Love one person truly and soon you find yourself loving others, and so – being love – Matua has always sought others for the Covenant of Love. It is why Matua creates, and who knows how many worlds and universes have been borne of Matua’s love in dimensions beyond our own? But today let us tell the story of our own world, loved of the Father.

There came a day when the love of Matua felt again the need to expand, and so *Ruah* brooded over the face of watery chaos, and Matua spoke a world into being. The Son rejoiced to see the dawning light of a new universe and set its foundation and boundaries. A space was opened in Eternity to allow there to be Time, and the walls of infinity were pulled back so that there could be space and matter. Matua saw that it was beautiful, but Love seeks more than just beauty; love seeks mutuality, so Matua spoke again, and again, and life came into being, and then, at the last, Matua spoke and *Ruah* breathed and there came into existence a Human Being, one who bore just enough eternity to be uncomfortable in time and just enough infinity to yearn beyond space and matter, and who carried just enough of Matua’s heart to love. This was Adham, humanity, and he was made to love Matua fully and freely.

It had to be freely, you understand. Love that is constrained is simply not love. It might be adoration, or dependence, or something else, but if it is not given freely it is not love. So Adham was given the ability to love freely. But because he *was* free, he chose to withhold his love. He chose not to join with Matua in covenant, but rather to compete with Matua, to seek independence from Matua, even superiority over Matua. As I said, Adham was free. Not smart, but free. The first Adham rejected Matua’s love, and every Adham since has followed the same path. We have sought, in the words of Genesis 2, to be “like God, knowing all things, both good and evil.” We have built towers on earth, monuments to our own imagined greatness. We have set ourselves to conquer land and sea and sky, claiming what Matua spoke into being as ours and planting our flags on them to prove it. And when others of our own race have sought to plant *their* flags where we wished to plant ours, then we have turned against each other. We invented murder and then expanded that idea and invented war. We invented private possession of things, and then promptly invented stealing of other people’s things. We noticed that some people were different from others – having different colors or reproductive organs, for instance – and those who were strong moved quickly to subjugate those who were less strong. We invented oppression and slavery and, eventually, genocide. From the beginning, we have chosen to set ourselves up as rivals to our Creator, which would be laughable if our pitiful pride had not caused so much destruction and pain.

Now none of this had to happen. We *could* have chosen to love. But Matua had known it was possible. Matua was grieved, but still he loved. He can no more stop loving than he can stop being, so he settled down for the long process of bringing rebellious Adham back to the Covenant of Love, step by step. Adham had not been ready for the great gift of freedom – he’d been like a toddler entrusted with a bomb – and so the Father set about teaching his child how to use his gift. He sent *Ruah* to roam the earth, to find any man or woman who had chosen love over destruction. There were not many, but there were a few. There was one called Enoch, another called Noah, and then one called Abraham. Abraham loved Matua, and Matua loved him. “I will make this man a nation. I will create one people who will show all the world what it is like to live in the Covenant of

Love.” And so Matua blessed Abraham and walked with him, and his son, and grandsons, and their descendants. As time passed, the people of Abraham often neglected the Covenant of Love, but they did not forget entirely, and Matua never forgot them. When they fell into slavery in the land of Egypt, Matua found another man of trust, Moses, and sent him to set the people free. Through many wonders, Matua delivered the people of Abraham from slavery and brought them to a mountain, where he claimed them as his own and gave them laws to follow.

Now giving the people laws might sound as if Matua had given up on the whole idea of “freedom,” but that’s not how it works. Even we earthly parents know that if our children are ever to make their own free choices, we must give them rules when they are young. We make them clean their rooms when they are small, so that they will know how. When they are grown and living on their own, they can choose whether to live in a clean space or a dirty one – but if they don’t know how to clean, then they don’t really have that choice, do they? And so the Father established laws, to show his children how to live, so that one day they might choose to live well even without laws. Do not kill each other, Matua said, or take things that others cherish or speak falsely or break promises. Honor me and love me. You have had my name called over you; do not defile it. And you will be my people, and I will be your Father.

The laws helped, perhaps, sometimes. In a few cases. Mostly the people continued in their old ways, but among the people who had the law, there arose a few who understood, who grasped the purpose of the laws and entered into the Covenant of Love with Matua. There were warriors who delivered the people from harm – Joshua, Deborah, Gideon, David. There were wise rulers who sought to lead the people back to the Covenant – Samuel, Hezekiah, Josiah. But most of all, there were men and women called prophets who were filled with Ruah and spoke of a time when Covenant would be restored and made new by Matua. One was named Hosea, whom you heard in our scripture today, who declared that Matua would never cease to love, never cease to give good gifts, never cease to create. Another, called Isaiah, spoke of a time when hatred and war would both be laid to rest. A great prophet named Jeremiah declared that there would be a new Covenant beyond rules, in which Matua and Matua alone would act. People would be restored to love not by the works of law but by the work of Matua.

And another prophet, whom we also call Isaiah, spoke more boldly still. He said that when Matua restored the people, it would not be just the descendants of Abraham but it would be all nations, for Matua created all nations for the same purpose, for the sake of love. And then that prophet spoke a deeper mystery yet. He said that this restoration, which would be beyond the law and beyond all human divisions and hatreds, would come by means of sacrifice. One who had never turned away from the Covenant of Love would subject himself to the consequences of Adham’s rebellion and would turn back time and finitude forever. But we’ll have to tell that part of the story last week.

Last week I told the story of the Spirit, Ruah, from the beginning – but I had to tell about Matua and the Son along the way, because her story is not hers alone. Today I have told the story of the Father, but of course Ruah and the Son were there, because his stories are theirs as well. Next week, as I tell the story of the Son and that sacrifice that Isaiah foretold, it will be the same story again. They are three, but their story is one. And maybe that’s a good way to think of the Holy Trinity.