

SERMON for Sunday, June 5, 2005
Hosea 5:15-6:6, Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

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Turn and Return

In this season of weddings and graduations, of Father's Day and Mother's Day, celebrations of all sorts, we have an issue in the gifts department. No, not Lake Edge's Gifts Committee, which receives special financial gifts to pay for specific things, like scholarships and furnishings for our newly-remodeled space. No, gifts, as in presents. Some of you may not concern yourself at all with those obligatory items, merely toss the invitation toward your partner, muttering 'You take care of it'. But we run into a whole set of expectations when it comes to the gifts department: how much money should we spend? How much ought we to spend? Should we simply give a check? Should we give them a gift card to Menard's? or Barnes and Noble? Should it be something we like, or that they like? And the question that has seemingly recently come up: Is it proper to give a gift – new and unused – that you have been given? In other words, is it all right to put new wrapping paper and a fresh bow on that still-in-the-carton mini-food-processor that Aunt Margaret gave you for your wedding – and you already had two others – and give it to your best friend's daughter at her wedding shower? Is it all right to regift? Yes, that's a new word in the vocabulary: regift. Take a gift and give it again. The etiquette mavens are still out on this one. The thinking seems to find it acceptable, if...if it is indeed a new model still available in the store, if it is something that the recipient would truly want and use, if you can sincerely give it as if you had chosen it in the first place, and if...you inspect the package carefully.

When I was about to be married almost thirty years ago, the ladies of the congregation I served at the time got together to give me a shower. It was a wonderful occasion, with cake and punch, mints and nuts, all the girls and women of the church gather in a very heart-warming show of affection. And there were gifts, many handmade, many with a personal touch, many beautiful as well as practical items. One of the eldest ladies in attendance gave me a box wrapped in silver and white paper, the paper a bit yellowed, a bit mussed as if it had been in the back of a closet, the silver bow slightly askew. I opened the box and took out of the crinkled tissue paper a green frosted glass footed candy dish. I lifted off the lid, and there nestled in the bottom was a small card: 'with love to Jeannette'. The gift had been regifted.

Turn and return.....In both our Old and New Testament lessons for today we hear the same theme echoed in the words of the prophet Hosea, in the words of Jesus. "For I desire mercy, steadfast love and not sacrifice." We turn to the Lord to remember, and return the great gift of love that has been given to us. It would seem almost too simple. We are well represented as we read Scripture, the flaws of the human condition ours as well, although the historical circumstance may change. God's people in the time of the prophet Hosea, about five centuries before the birth of Christ, had turned away from God, practicing love only when it was easy, only when the demand was not too hard. In a time of challenge, they fell away from their promise. "Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes away early." And when Jesus ate with those who were considered bad, with the tax collectors, he was chastised by the rulekeepers, the Pharisees. Consorting with sinners? You bet he was, and non-apologetic. For it was the Pharisees who were the ones who had turned

away from God's love, who had substituted a rigid code of rules and behavior and dos-and-don'ts for compassion.

Moving through the centuries, we can find ourselves in the same predicament. And I think that what happens so often to us is that in the middle of our diverse and complex culture and in the middle of all the choices we have to make, like those of old we forget who we are and what we have and turn away from God's love. Not intentionally, but turn nonetheless. I remember how fascinated I was – fascinated and horrified – at Alex Haley's book and movie, *Roots*, depicting the tragedy of men and women of Africa being stolen and sold into slavery for the American market, the story of families and lives through generations. The continuing saga was of the roots that connected them, the roots that shaped their lives and formed their character, roots that could not be shaken off, roots that had a fast hold on them, that claimed them. And I remember the first time I read the stories of Ellis Island, the immigrant story of my own grandparents and the immigrant stories of many of our ancestors. No matter how far we remove ourselves by geography, by education, by economics, their struggles to establish themselves, to find work and attain citizenship and security, shape the people we have become. Our roots pull us, even when we try to turn away.

We have our roots of a greater sort – our place with God, our identity in God's love – if only we would return.

Olga Yaqob of Iraq, in a recent volume of the journal *Theology Today*, wrote of her life's journey and her life's work. Sister Olga is a member of the Missionaries of the Virgin Mary, an order of religious sisters founded in Iraq in 1996. She reflects on God's love and presence, in her words, "How can the church reflect on the metaphor 'God is love' in its mission and life, especially at a time of suffering?...How can I do the mission of the church and help people to see the light of God's love even in the darkness of their suffering?" Eight years of war with Iran, then with Kuwait, then the Gulf War, now the current conflict. She continues, "In all these years I have heard Jesus calling me to carry the mission of his church within my little heart. He called me to stop, astounded, and listen; and then to answer – sometimes with deed rather than words; at other times with both. I saw confusion and questioning all around me in the screams and misery of children. They were not asking for funds or materials. Staring into my eyes with grief, I heard the voices of each one of them asking, with hope, 'Do you love me?' Their looks and questions reminded me of Jesus' look into Simon's eyes when he asked him, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' To answer this question from our Lord, I lived with God's people in their misery. My journey became a new path of the Stations of the Cross, with stops named the disabled, the handicapped, the prisoners, the villagers, invalids in hospitals and so on. I began sailing with the ship of my service, from one shore to another, toward the depth to which Jesus is calling me. Living the answer to this question, 'Do you love me?' has meant anchoring my life in the depths of human encounters...During these years, my mission has become a living gospel. Living with the poorest of the poor, who have suffered through many wars and years of economic embargo, I realized their need to see God's presence for themselves, in the midst of their suffering. In their words, I have heard the voices of their hearts, searching for that divine presence to fill the empty spaces..."

Sister Olga's amazing story, though not headline-grabbing, returns us to the love of Christ that is the gift, the roots that anchor. Whenever we turn away, we are called once again to remember and return.

This morning we will have the wonderful privilege of baptizing Lillijana Marie, as we have so often baptized in the past several years, and as we will continue. Her parents, her sponsors, the congregation will promise to nurture her in faith, teach her the amazing Biblical story, bring her here to learn of God's people and experience God's table of grace. And her parents, her sponsors, and to some extent we the congregation will worry and fuss over her, like we all have worried and fussed over all of our children. What should they read? Where to go to school? Rules for discipline? Enrichment activities? Sports teams and music lessons? How to fit all the desirables into our schedules? How will we teach her the values of citizenship, tolerance, curiosity, compassion, service? So much, and so little time. Perhaps the most significant action we can take is to step aside, and let the love of God pour over her and wash her and claim her. So that she will always know, and return.

Isn't that what we all need? In our increasingly complex world, where scenes of human suffering are real and present to us and as close as the nearest TV, where we cannot ignore the consequences of war, and we live in communities of many languages and religions, we often lose our way. We seek too simple answers to complicated issues, we look for a list of requirements to meet and a code of behavior to follow. We worry over long lists of necessities. And perhaps the most significant action we can take is to let the gift of God's love wash over us and claim us once again.

Sister Olga of Iraq speaks again, "In all those years, I learned that, despite the difficulties that my country and my church went through during history and in the recent past, God's love remains: two hidden hands, holding his children, filling them with warmth, understanding, courage, and truth."

God's gift of love – given once, and again and again. Amen.