

Hosea 11: 1-11
Colossians 3: 12-17
Luke 12: 22-31

Cords of Human Kindness
August 4, 2013
Mary R. Brownlow

I have a picture on my refrigerator that was taken when my son Willy was about 7 months old. I am sort of crouched behind him, holding his hands, and he is standing up, in his diaper. He has got a lovely expression on his face, and I am just grinning, watching him from above and behind. There is no way he was going to let go and walk, or even stand, but you can see in the photo that this is a stage, a step, in that process. That moment of connection and potential was joyful and rich.

Family connections: a place where the heights and depths of human experience are lived out. We see it in Scripture, we see it in literature, we see it everyday, right in front of us. Many of us can remember times like that described in Mary Pipher's book, In the Shelter of Each Other. She writes:

"When my son was ten and my daughter was four, we camped at a lake. In the afternoon Zeke landed a 12 inch bass and Sara rescued a frog. While my husband played his guitar under a cottonwood, I lay reading on the shore. For dinner we ate hamburgers and beans. In the dark we roasted marshmallows around a fire. We listened to cicadas. A moon the shape and color of a pumpkin rose over the lake. Sara snuggled into her father and said a line so beautiful that I can quote it 15 years later: 'I'm melting into richness.'"

There are family moments like that. Of course, her children had not yet become teenagers...she also writes that they drove her to distraction at times as they grew up. But she had that memory. So she knew that the family could be a holy place.

But we would be fooling ourselves if we said that was all a family was. Each of us could tell stories when 4 year olds were not "melting into richness": stories of siblings arguing over inheritances, of un-repentant and un-forgiven sins; stories of parents and children who feel neglected or oppressed; the pain of loss. Often, the deepest wounds that we will feel happen in the family. The family is a broken place, a place of pain, of separation.

Any faith that speaks only the language of joy is incomplete. Any faith that speaks only the language of pain is incomplete. We know that they are locked together. The prophet Hosea knew this, and his words locate that paradox within the family. In the book of Hosea, the prophet rails against the people of Israel for forgetting and breaking their covenant with their God and for worshipping other gods. In the first few chapters, Hosea describes the relationship between God and the people as a broken marriage, with all the pain and regret and shame that accompanies infidelity. In the 11th chapter, the metaphor changes. It remains in the family, but now Israel (who is also called Ephraim after one of the northern tribes) is a beloved child who is abandoning the mother or father. We hear the anguish of a parent who remembers a time of "melting into richness." He or she remembers holding the little hands and teaching the infant to walk, smiles on all faces. God was like those who lift an infant to their cheeks - is there anything better than the feeling of that little face? Is there anything better than kissing those fat little wrists? This passage speaks to that deep, visceral physical love of a child: we and God can remember those moments. But the words of Hosea are all

the more poignant because they **are** memories. It's in the past. And because of those memories, God's pain is all the worse. The holy and the broken are indeed locked together.

We hear a sort of inner dialogue in God's mind: a struggle between justice and compassion. We are allowed to listen in, we are expected to empathize with God. The only way out of the pain is through the warmth and tenderness of compassion, spilling into forgiveness. The memories of the moments of joy, when the cords of human kindness were intact, compel the parent to leap over the barrier and forgive. Without those memories, we might not have the strength to make the moves of reconciliation. And, from the other side, without the assurance of forgiveness, we might not have the strength to respond. The prophet gives us a glimpse into the workings of divine and human empathy, and tells us that God's justice and compassion are beyond our understanding.

I read an article a few days ago whose subtitle was "The case against empathy." Paul Bloom writes about the way we tend to respond in a very particular way to news about certain tragedies, especially if we see pictures of the victims. He calls it "an instinctive mirroring of others' experience"....bringing "our moral concern into a laser pointer of focused attention." And so the story of a child stuck in a well, or a missing teenager, floods the media and grips our interest (at least for a short period of time), but sometimes brings inappropriate and unhelpful responses. Bloom gives the example of the horrific shooting in Connecticut last December:

"Newtown, in the wake of the Sandy Hook massacre, was inundated with so much charity that it became a burden. More than eight hundred volunteers were recruited to deal with the gifts that were sent to the city—all of which kept arriving despite earnest pleas from Newtown officials that charity be directed elsewhere. A vast warehouse was crammed with plush toys the townspeople had no use for; millions of dollars rolled in to this relatively affluent community. We felt their pain; we wanted to help. Meanwhile—just to begin a very long list—almost twenty million American children go to bed hungry each night, and the federal food-stamp program is facing budget cuts of almost twenty per cent...."

The "laser point of focused attention" allows us to keep our circle of concern very small.

Like the word "empathy", the word "family" is a loaded word. What does it mean, really? What makes a family? One might think of biological families: for instance: what used to be called the nuclear family of two parents and children. But we all know too many families that do not fit that mold. Is a family made by people pooling resources and helping each other over a long period of time? Is it made by people loving each other even when they disagree? Is a family made by visiting people in the hospital or bringing them casseroles when they are sick? Is it made by caring about a good report card or a race well run? Is it made by feeling someone else's pain? All of these things can go into making a family, even when people are not related "by blood." All of them can be translated into behavior that benefits a larger circle, and does so with purpose and effectiveness.

We all have "families of origin"; many of us have "families of choice"; some of us have "blended families." There is a history of this in the Christian tradition. The early Christians were experts at "formed families" who gathered around tables and shared meals...especially meals where they remember the founder of their family, Jesus. They pooled their resources, cared for each other in hard times, and forgave each other for the sake of joyful memories. They took in a lot of people who were unwanted anywhere else. They called each other brother and sister. I am quite sure that, within these early churches, as within any close-knit group, people hurt each other. I am quite sure

that there were complaints and disagreements. Other wise, why would Paul have to write to the church at Colossae, “Bear with one another...forgive each other.” But in that formed family, as in other families, “compassion grows warm and tender” and we allow those feelings to get the upper hand. We let compassion win out. And we don’t stop there: we widen the possibilities of empathy to seek the good of those outside these walls. I translate my love of a child holding my hands as he learns to walk into care for another child, and another child, and children whose face looks nothing like my own.

We have the potential to become a church family. Some might say that this potential has been realized, some may not. The cords of human kindness are drawn by gathering around a table and sharing a bit of food together in worship. We gather around other tables too: in Sunday School and in committee meetings and at church suppers and at coffee hour. But this table, in this room, is the symbol and location of all the other formed families of faith. Here we act out our sharing and call to mind the memory and presence of Jesus. We return to this table every month, seeking communion with God and with each other. But unless that communion reshapes our empathy, so that we can imagine new ways to address the broken and wounded families of the world, we have not tasted the fullness of the heavenly feast.

The Word of God speaks to the heights and depths of our existence, to the paradox of family love and pain. To this table, we come together, bringing our deepest pain and our fullest joy. God takes them all in, and we know that they are God’s pains and joys as well. We are bold enough to call ourselves the family of God. The ties that bind all our families are images and reflections of those cords of human kindness, the bands of love spoken of by Hosea. Let us thank God for each other, and the melting richness of compassion. Amen.