

**Hosea 6:6**

Second Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 5-A)

**Lessons for the Day: Hosea 5:15-6:6; Romans 4:18-25; Matthew 9:9-13****Lip Service or Life Service?**

June 11, 2023

***“For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.”***

Dear friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed;

A former missionary in India once told of needing assistance in transferring a critically ill man from his house to the local hospital. She requested help from two “holy men” who were sitting not far away, intoning their devotions. She said she would never forget the fire of resentment that blazed in their eyes as they replied, “We? We are holy men. We never do anything for anyone.”

That is not the type of answer we would expect from people who consider themselves “holy”. Rather we would expect them to be among the first to lend a hand. Unfortunately, the attitude of these two men is far from unique. We see it often in our world today, as we have throughout history. This is pretty much the attitude of the Pharisees in Jesus' day. In our Gospel lesson today, the Pharisees complain, saying to the disciples: ***“Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”*** (Matthew 9:11, ESV) For them, holiness meant keeping away from anyone they saw as less than holy. The problem was that they were so busy trying to act holy that they had no time to actually be holy. They were so caught up in the rituals and practices of the faith that they never really seemed to take to heart the real meaning and purpose behind all their religious practices. We see the same thing among the people of Hosea's day. People were going through the rituals of offering their daily sacrifices and burnt offerings, but did not show the real heart and soul of faith in their lives.

What about us? The words of our text today are an example of what James is talking about when he, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit tells us: ***“What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?”*** (James 2:14, ESV) Or we can think of Jesus' words of warning: ***“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues”*** (Matthew 23:1-6, ESV)

Do we offer mere lip service to our faith, without ever really living out our faith? Is our faith alive and evident in all we say and do and think? What God desires, and what is His delight, is to see His people living a faith that comes from the heart, that reaches deep inside us and which overflows with love for God and with love for others. God does not want religious lip service from us. He wants our life service, as we live to honour Him in all that we do.

There are two errors that people can fall into when we read these words of Hosea. Some interpret them as saying God doesn't want our spiritual practices as a church. They hear God say: ***“I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.”***, and think of the words ‘sacrifice’ and ‘burnt offering’ as referring to our worship practices. For some, it would be better if we didn't have any religious ritual in our lives. This is what we see in those who preach the mantra, “deeds, not creeds”. Maybe we should stop baptizing. Maybe we should cancel the celebration of Holy Communion. Maybe we shouldn't worry so much about being in church because we might see that as the be-all and end-all of our faith. That is a misunderstanding of what God is saying to us. It isn't that God doesn't want us to do these things. In fact He commands them. He encourages us to do these things. He promises to work through His Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. He calls us to gather regularly and faithfully around His Word and to join with our brothers and sisters in Christ in worship and praise. He leads us here, because He is here to meet with us and to serve us with His gifts to strengthen, encourage and bless us. He just doesn't want these things to be empty rituals.

The other danger can be that we think our actions and works somehow save us—at least, the right kind of works. We have to do those acts of mercy and steadfast love. If not, then all we do is empty and meaningless. While there is a great deal of truth in that statement, we have to remember what Paul tells us in our epistle today: ***“For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith.”*** (Romans 4:13, ESV) The things we do cannot save us. They are not what lead us to faith, but they flow from our faith.

So, what do we learn from Hosea, and from Jesus' repetition of these words in our Gospel lesson? We have all heard the

expression, talk is cheap. Even actions are cheap, if there is no substance to them; if they do not flow from the heart. When I was at seminary, we used to talk about the number of people who would go out all week sowing their wild oats and then come to church on Sunday just to pray for crop failure. They went through the motions of faith, but there seemed to be no heart to their worship. It was just something they did and got out of the way before they went on with the rest of their lives. It was empty ritual, empty worship. And what is perhaps worse today is the fact that many times people don't even bother to go through the motions any more. It still never ceases to amaze me that the majority of Canadians consider themselves Christians, and yet only about 25% of them ever bother going to church. As Jesus Himself said: ***“This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.”*** (Matthew 15:8-9, ESV)

God doesn't want empty ritual. He doesn't want us to go through the motions of Christianity. He doesn't want us to offer lip service to something we have no intention of doing. He wants to see our faith flowing from the heart. You might say that He wants to see us practice what we preach. Of course, at our best we don't do all that God has every right to expect of us. We are imperfect people. We are sinners. We can come to church, hear the word and vow with all our hearts to live a wonderful, Christ-like life in all we do. But then we get home from church and the kids do something silly, and we blow up at them. Or we start to argue on the way home from church about something ridiculous. Does that mean that we have just wasted an hour? Does that mean that our worship and all our good intentions are useless? No, it does mean that we are sinful people who need to come again and again before our God, asking for His forgiveness, asking for the strength of His Holy Spirit to help and guide us as we seek to live as His people. We need to remember that the true Christian life is a struggle against all the temptations and inclinations to do what God does not want to do, even as we struggle to be what He has made it possible for us to be. We come, we learn, we try—and yes, we often fail. But don't give up! Don't stop coming to church; don't stop praying or going to Communion or anything else. Come and learn what God has done for you and for me. Come, and hear how Jesus gave His life for us on the cross, dying in our place so that we might never really die. Come and hear how Jesus rose again from the dead so that we might have eternal life with Him. Come and hear how He has set us free and how He blesses us with the Spirit who makes it possible for us to do more than just go through the motions. Through Jesus it is possible for us live a life that is pleasing to God. By His very life, Jesus showed us steadfast love and mercy through His sacrifice. He didn't just say that He loved us. He showed it and declared it powerfully as He died on the cross and as He rises again from the dead. When same Jesus is in our heart through faith, when His love and peace fills us and flows from us, then we will do far more than offer mere lip service to our faith. Then we will willingly offer sacrifices that are in keeping with His will. We'll do more than just go through the motions. We will be alive in Christ, as He shines forth in all that we do.

There once was a monk named Simon, who, like another monk named Simeon Stylites, had himself hoisted to the top of an ancient column to get away from the world of people and to live there in pious meditation. There is a legend about him, which says that after some time an angel appeared to Simon and urged him to come down. As he did, the angel led him to the home of a poor, struggling shepherd, trying to eke out a living for his family under very adverse conditions. In the poor home of the shepherd, Simon found a girl who was orphaned as an infant. The shepherd had taken her into his home and his heart, had shared with her the bare necessities of his family, and had given her his love and devotion. There the angel left Simon, who understood the message of the angel. He too should remain in the valley to help, to serve, to sacrifice in the commonplace lives of discouraged people. This is more pleasing to God.

That is what our text is telling us. Simply put, God wants us to walk by faith in all we do. We know God by faith. That faith changes us. It changes our lives, so that everything we do and all of our attitudes and actions flow from that faith. Knowing Christ and all He has done for us leads us to live a Christ-like life in the world. Now we take our faith with us to work, to school, on our vacation or whatever we might be doing. He wants us to live that faith as we seek to love and serve Him in all things, and as we seek to love those around us. As forgiven people, we forgive those who wrong us. As people who are loved, we show love for others in our attitudes towards them and in the things we do for them. Then our faith will be more than just empty ritual. And it will be something in which God is well pleased. Amen.