

## Fourth Sunday in Lent – March 22, 2020

### Hosea 5:15-6:3

15 Then I will go back to my place until they admit their guilt. And they will seek my face; in their misery they will earnestly seek me.” 1 “Come, let us return to the Lord. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds. 2 After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence. 3 Let us acknowledge the Lord; let us press on to acknowledge him. As surely as the sun rises, he will appear; he will come to us like the winter rains, like the spring rains that water the earth.”

Let’s start with a kind of guessing game this morning. I will briefly describe a situation and you try to think whether it sounds like the characters are being selfish and thinking only of themselves or being selfless and thinking of others. The first is a husband and wife who gave a gift to church. The money came from a piece of property that they had sold off. At first glance this sounds very selfless and generous for this couple to do. But then add in the details that they tried to pass off the amount that they gave as the total value of the property and actually kept some behind for themselves. Now they are seen as selfish and were only giving to make themselves look good in the eyes of others. Let’s try one more – two men were looking to get involved with a new organization and volunteered to take positions in the group. Again at face value it seems pretty selfless for them to volunteer their time in this way. But then add in that they were volunteering first for the power and glory of the position and suddenly it seems more selfish. Both cases are true stories from Scripture, the first was Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5 and James and John in our gospel lesson (Mt 20). There can be a fine line between selfish and selfless as what may seem okay at face value may have different motives underneath.

In the season of Lent one of the major themes is repentance. That is natural as we follow our Savior’s path to the cross. We see that he suffered and died to pay for sin, “to give his life as a ransom for many” as he told his disciples (Mt 20:28). And so we examine ourselves and see our sin and then repent of that sin, asking for forgiveness and turning away from it. The question of whether someone is selfish or selfless can be applied to repentance as well. Using the verses of our text from Hosea 5 and 6 we will first examine the repentance of the Israelites and then evaluate our own repentance and see whether it is selfish or selfless.

At first glance Israel’s words in verses 1-3 sound good. Just listen to verse 1: “Come, let us return to the Lord. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds.” They know that God will forgive. They know that God will help. In the right context these words could be spoken by any child of God.

But what is the context here? It is reflective of the cycle that Israel repeated throughout its history. The Israelites would be unfaithful to God. Instead of worshipping him, they worshipped others gods. Instead of following his will, they followed their own hearts. As a result God laid out his plan in verse 15: “Then I will go back to my place until they admit their guilt. And they will seek my face; in their misery they will earnestly seek me.” He would send punishment often in the form of other nations and armies who attack and enslave them. In their misery he wanted them to see the error of their ways and turn to him for their repentance.

So what is missing in verses 1-3? God was waiting for them to “admit their guilt” and that did not happen. They weren’t thinking it was their fault, if anything it was God’s—he had torn them to pieces and injured them. Their confession was just empty words. They thought that if they merely acknowledged the Lord (v. 3) and did what he wanted, then he would heal them and bind up their wounds. It wasn’t about what God wanted. Their repentance was selfish because they only went through the motions so that their lives could be good once again and then they could go back to their old ways. Verse 4 after our text describes God’s response to their repentance: “What can I do with you, Ephraim? What can I do with you, Judah? Your love is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears.” Their repentance was only out of convenience and would only last until they got what they wanted from God.

It is easy to point fingers at the Israelites and see how they were unfaithful to God so many times throughout the Old Testament. So let’s analyze our own repentance, whether it’s the personal confession we make on a daily basis or the weekly confession we make together at the beginning of our services. How might our motivation for repentance be selfish? Maybe we try to minimize our guilt—if I say I’m sorry, God will forgive me and then I can go out and do it again, it’s not that big a deal. Maybe we try to bargain with our guilt—if I say I’m sorry, then I’ll be on God’s good side and he’ll have to do something for me and take away this suffering in my life. Or maybe we feel no guilt—I’ll say I’m sorry and go through the motions to show I’m a good Christian, but really I have nothing to worry about, I’m doing pretty well in my life. Our sinful nature is selfish by default and will use any trick it can to distract the focus of our repentance.

But God takes sins seriously. Just as he sent other nation at times to conquer the Israelites and wake them up from their spiritual slumber, he can do the same today. God can use things like natural disasters and coronavirus pandemics to wake people up to the fact that life is not always comfortable and easy. The questions of life and death and what happens afterward cannot be ignored or hidden away for another time. We have to be ready at any time and a key part of this preparation is repentance.

So what does selfless repentance look like? It sees the high standards that God has set for us—to perfectly follow his will in everything. The only option is to admit guilt because we cannot be perfect in anything we do. And so we confess that we have sinned not because we’re trying to bargain with God or make a deal, not because he told us to and we are just trying to follow the rules, but because it is the truth and we earnestly need what he has to offer.

Which brings us back to the season of Lent. Here we are with our own laundry list of sins that we have confessed and no way to get rid of them or pay for them. But Jesus went to the cross to pay for our sins and take them away. His clean slate of a perfect life lived without sin becomes our clean slate. We repent because we need forgiveness for our sins. That forgiveness means that our sinful nature will not be able to drag us down to the punishment of hell, but that sinful nature will be removed as we enter into the perfection of heaven. Only then will all the fears and pains and problems of this world be over.

With the admission of guilt in place that comes with selfless repentance, this is where these words of chapter six can take on a different perspective and become a beautiful encouragement for us. “Come, let us return to the Lord. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds. After two days he will revive us; on the

third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence. Let us acknowledge the Lord; let us press on to acknowledge him. As surely as the sun rises, he will appear; he will come to us like the winter rains, like the spring rains that water the earth” (vv. 1-3). God is faithful, he will continue to take care of us. His grace and mercy will continue to pour down like the rains that fall in their seasons. This is a good thing as we will continue to need his forgiveness. Repentance includes turning away from sin and yet we will continue to sin. But as Paul reminded the Romans, “You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit” (8:9). The Holy Spirit will give us the strength to continue our pattern of repentance, admitting our guilt and receiving the forgiveness that Jesus won as we live according to the Spirit.

Selfish or selfless? We can apply that question to anyone in any situation in this life. What may seem to be the truth on the surface may be different from what is underneath. We cannot always know the answer to the question when it comes to others and so we focus on ourselves. When it comes to our repentance, is it selfish or selfless? We look at our sin and admit our guilt and turn to God for the forgiveness that only he can provide. He will heal us. He will revive us. He will restore us. All so that we may live in his presence forever. Amen.