

4th August 2019

Preacher: Jen Smith

Hymns: 91 The God of Abraham praise
 136 Morning has broken
 370 Breathe on me, Breath of God
 124 For the fruits of all creation
 661 Give me the faith which can remove

Readings: Hosea 11:1-11
 Colossians 3:1-11
 Luke 12:13-21

“Abundance and affluence”

Let us pray: Holy God, break your word as bread for the feeding of our souls. And may the words of my lips and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Silence

Friends I read the news every morning and everywhere I see a great longing that gives me hope – a longing for future to be good. I see it in the grief, the outrage about another shooting in the USA. In the talk of a ceasefire that holds in Syria, or a peace accord with the Taliban, and certainly in our own lives – I see that longing in the choice made today to baptise. And in the choice to marry, which also has happened right here yesterday. The problem is, not that we don't start with that longing but what we then do, how we respond to that longing. Do you not think Jesus' householder with the bigger barns longed for a better future? Or the child Israel gone astray in Hosea, over whom the prophet lamented? Or indeed, Paul writing in Colossians about a better a more powerful choice than anger and malice in the face of evil?

Today I want to let the scripture work us over a bit – make us aware of that longing in ourselves, and then coach us in our response.

Because we have a choice – and here is good news, always, always in Jesus we begin again. Hosea – this love song to the child of God, reminding us who we are; Colossians giving us a better way than to lash out when hurt, and Jesus in Luke, with that parable of the bigger barns.

So to begin, the longing.

And a guilty confession: I love home and personal makeover shows. The dating ones, the clothing and clutter ones, and the wallpaper ones - These are completely compelling for me, as people tear out the old beige and organise everything from businesses to shoes to paperwork.

But it's not just me – lots of people love these programmes! Whether it's a new garden or perfect paint and carpets, or the confidence to go on a date with someone you've fancied. These programmes speak to our shared desire for transformation, new life.

But I do not in the end think the longing which makes the TV programmes popular is for these things. It masks something more profound. It is a wide, diverse and personal longing made up of thousands of individual stories – looking for ways to deal with the prospect of pain, or hardship, or injustices that we see around us. We seek safety and security in a world that sometimes offers precious little of either.

But here's the thing – the most clutter free well planned kitchen or neatest closets are not going to be enough. The best healthcare, the strongest army, will not be enough. There must be a way to do more than just build a modern version of a bigger barn.

Our scriptures today offer two contrasting ways we might respond, two strategies.

This is my second point today – to draw these two out – so durably writ in the different voices of scripture Hosea, Paul, Luke.

One, I'll call an ethic of affluence – an approach to life which is about getting and keeping enough of whatever will make me feel safe – money, houses, healthcare, national pride - an attitude of defence that anticipates attack and guards against it. An ethic that writes off someone who hurts me, and justifies malice, anger and retribution as defence. (Hear the echoes of Colossians, and Hosea?) An attitude that treats the resource of the world, including love and security, as limited commodities.

You could think of this set of strategies, affluence, as the way of the farmer Jesus spoke of in the parable, the kind of things he did so that he was able to say to his soul, 'Soul you have enough now you can relax, eat drink and be merry.'

The other way of life the scriptures refer to I want to call an ethic of abundance – an alternative to respond to that same longing for security, but with an alternative, parallel set of strategies - an approach to life which measures power and wealth not by how much we keep, but by how much we share. Not by how much is left on the table but how much gets eaten.

Which builds safety not by getting stronger locks and taller walls, but by knowing our community and finding ways to meet our needs together.

Abundance, I would call an attitude that seeks security, and care, through interdependence, rather than withdrawal from one another. This is the ethic of a God who comes among us and goes to the cross and calls it victory! That creates people who are neighbours, not consumers competing for limited amounts of good.

Affluence, abundance – two ways of life, two strategies for dealing with difficult things, for answering our deepest longings. I am bound to say, I think the process of following Jesus Christ which we call conversion, or sanctification in Wesleyan terms, is about letting God tempt us little by little away from affluence thinking, little by little into an ethic of abundance.

And so easy to confuse, because they have at their heart the same perfectly righteous desire for safety – to know we are loved and home and well and our children will be too.

Note that Jesus never condemned the farmer with his bigger barns, he only said that they wouldn't work.

And this brings us to my third point, our choice.

One of my predecessors in this pulpit, Colin Morris, said '...when you are compelled to weave barbed wire around yourself as a protection against your fellow citizens, your security is a form of imprisonment – you can only shut others out at the price of shutting yourself in.' I think he was right. And should we be surprised? Because God didn't work this way with us! Jesus called the crowds and feasted together – he did not fast alone!

It is not even that affluence is bad, it is just that it is cheap! We are promised more!! Who would sit in economy seats when the whole of first class was free and open?

So what will work, if barbed wire will not? To live with our own fragility of body and mind, let alone the fragility of bank accounts and credit cards and all the other things which I carry to keep me safe.

Surely the promise of the Revelation that God will wipe every tear and that death shall be no more are not just kind words?

I think this is what all three of our scriptures are about – an offer of a better way – an invitation Jesus makes to each of us, to make concrete choices for kindness, and strength, and compassion. Hosea – come back from slavery! Colossians – choose something stronger than malice! Luke – the bigger barn.

And this choice, for a way of abundance living and to resist the ethics of affluence, all only and ever made possible because we are held in the grace of Jesus Christ who is alive among us. We need to remember who we are, under all our masks, to have the confidence to risk this choice.

Hosea: the prophet wrings his hands – ‘the young people today, what are they come to – did I not hold their little hands as they learned to walk, and comfort the fears of their childhood?’ And did I not name them and bring them out of Egypt, for them to want to return now to slavery under Pharaoh? That false safety of the slave? Stop and think what it is to have God say right out – I named you, I call you. And hear what the prophet is saying – I will not give you up – I refuse to be parted from you. Remember who you are.

Remember that the stone which held the water in the font today is the stone on which the first Methodist preachers of Antigua stood in the 1760s - those women whom the world called ‘slave.’ If they could choose a better way, cannot we as well? This is who we are.

And yet, I hear Hosea speaking right to me here, because on any given day I’m far more likely to choose the false safety of affluence - to build the bigger barn of the farmer in Jesus’ parable.

I trust affluence, because I know where I am with it – I have faith that when I go up to the counter at any shop with my plastic card with the chip in it I can say to my soul, ‘Soul, you can relax: when you tap your card on the machine, the nice person behind the counter will give you food and drink to make merry.’ Bigger barns.

Let's be clear – the problem is not with using the card or needing food, but with my getting into the habit of thinking it is there as my right, because I did my time in the queue and I have the money – forgetting that my food, clothing, or whatever, is connected to a whole set of relationships and interactions that put it there on the shelf.

That's the seduction of affluence – the slavery against which Hosea warned.

The ethics of affluence are seductive, and subtle. To have security about where our food is coming from, our medical care is coming from, or our safety is good. The problem is that asserting our right to it over another is not the way to everyone getting fed, or in the end, to protect ourselves. It is not that bigger barns aren't nice, it's that they do not work.

Where affluence is about individual wealth, abundance is about communities where no one is hungry. Where affluence separates people, encouraging me to protect my home and possessions, abundance draws us into community, and demands our care-taking of each other. These are not about a single choice, but about the habit of choosing something different, stronger than self-protection.

This is what Paul meant in the reading from Colossians, put away from yourselves anger, and malice, and slander, and all kinds of abusive talk. Remember that in the new self, there is no hierarchy of persons, because we are all in Christ, and Christ in all. Is that not strength, and freedom?

Abundance is evangelical – it is good news of Jesus Christ and must be told and re told. Affluence it seems to me is more about keeping a good thing secret.

And yes, abundance makes visible the invisible hands that stock our shelves, abundance fights the isolation of older people in tower blocks on rough estates. Abundance teaches us to know our actual neighbours and begs them to join us at the table of thanksgiving. It is about answering our shared longing (remember the makeover TV shows?) with something more durable than bigger barns.

What will this mean for you, in the choices you make this week? Maybe it means going across and knocking on the door of the neighbour we haven't met. Maybe it means getting the courage to go back to school and retrain after we've been made redundant. Or inviting someone we don't know, here at church, for a coffee or a meal. Maybe it means

taking the risk of forgiving someone we love and beginning again. Maybe it means taking the risk of admitting our own faults and beginning again.

Evil is real. Pain is real – the longing to escape and resist these is shared between the many people, and is of God.

But we do not need more stuff, nor instant makeovers to make us new. We do not need to be afraid, blessing is also real. Grace is real, and here at God's table we will be fed.

AMEN.