

As His Own

Rev. Rebecca Clancy
Hosea 11:1-9
Psalm 8
Hebrews 5:1-10

It has been for me an exceptionally busy summer. Summer's beginning was consumed by the final paperwork for the adoption of my newest daughter, Gao, and the planning of a lengthy trip to the other side of the world to escort her home. On the heels of the planning, of course, was the trip itself – which I would not exactly describe as a beach holiday. Then came the homecoming, which was marked not only by a massive adjustment on the part of every member of the family, but also a spate of appointments that Gao required -- appointments with doctors of seemingly every specialty, appointments with dentists, appointments with school officials, government agencies, social workers, etc., etc., etc., Before I knew it, it was time to get the girls ready for school.

As busy a summer as it was, I took pride in the fact that I was equal to it. I was on task. I was on top of it – a model of industry, efficiency, and multi-tasking. But, as the good book says, pride cometh before the fall. I was humbled when my son broadsided me with the reminder that he was starting college out of state in 72 hours. He had somehow slipped through the cracks. For a while then, I was in busyness overdrive.

The summer has been so hectic that it was not until a week ago last Monday, at 830 a.m., as I watched the first grade lines filing into school, that it struck me that the summer's

busyness was coming to a screeching halt. Every single one of my children was now in school full time. I was returning to an empty house. You'd think I'd be giddy, especially since this is the second round. But I wasn't. Just the opposite, I felt lonely and sad. Loneliness and sorrow are not always things you anticipate. Sometimes they just hit you.

The next day as the girls and I headed to school, I was sensitized to my feelings. I was a perfect sad sack as I led them to their lines. They didn't notice, however. They were in a different place. They were delighted to be back at school. After all, it is pretty exciting for a child – new backpack, new lunch box, new shoes, new school supplies, new friends, new teachers, new routines... I watched Avi's line file in and then Gao's. As I watched May's I noticed a smudge on her face. "Wait, May!" I exclaimed, "You have something on your face." Pacing her in line, I did what every child detests but what parents can't stop themselves from doing. I licked my fingers and reached for her face. "Mommm!" She chastised me, "you're embarrassing me!" Now it was my turn to be embarrassed, especially since her teacher was witnessing the entire spectacle. "Don't worry, Mrs. Clancy," her teacher said. "I'll love her as my own." And off she went. Suddenly I found myself blinking back tears. *She'll love her as her own.* That smarted. She's not *her* own, I thought, she's *my* own. I don't want her to love her for me. I want to love her myself. *She'll love her as her own.* It was cold comfort.

I went from school to run a few errands before settling into work. The first errand was to mail a letter to May's Chinese foster mother. May was over three years old when I adopted her, and on "Gotcha Day" I found sewn into the lining of her coat a piece of

gauze with Chinese lettering on it. I forgot all about it until I got home. Unable to decipher it I took it to a Chinese restaurant knowing someone there could. The proprietor told me it was an address. Beneath it were the words, "Please don't forget me." It was from May's Chinese foster mother. She raised May from the time she was born. She then had to part with her. We have since become correspondents. She has written to me of that parting. She wrote that it was the hardest thing that she ever had to do in her life; that it broke her heart; and that there was not a moment that she did not miss May and yearn for her. I remember writing to her the words May's teacher had just said to me, "Don't worry. I'll love her as my own." I'm sure she smarted from those words as I did, only much worse. I'm sure she thought as I did - She's not *her* own, she's *my* own. I don't want her to love her for me. I want to love her myself. I'm sure it was cold comfort.

Of course, there is May to consider. In the case of May's Chinese foster mother, it was best that May leave China. Her Chinese foster mother loved her as much as any mother loves any child, but the stark reality is that they had only the illusion of permanency and security. May was not a legal member of her family. She was a ward of and subject to the state. Moreover, she would never have access in China to education or medical care, and she would always be impoverished.

And in my case, it is best, obviously, that May go off to school; that she grow up and away from me. Parents can't make their children the foils of their need to love. It's best for May all around, but sometimes what's best is hard, especially when what's best is

letting go. Maybe it shouldn't be such cold comfort after all to know that in letting go, a child is loved.

Because only imagine the opposite. Imagine if in letting go, a child were not loved. Imagine, worse, if in letting go a child fell into the wrong hands, hands that were ignorant and hateful and violent and murderous. And when you imagine this, you will have imagined what occurred in the case of the greatest love that any parent ever had for any child – God's love for his son Jesus Christ.

Sometimes we fail to see God that way; we fail to see God as a father. Yes, it's all over the language of the New Testament, the language of the creeds, the language of the central theological formulations of the faith like the Trinity, yet sometimes we instead see God as imperious and impassive and impenetrable and impassible. If he's marked by any emotion, it's anger – annihilating anger. And because of his anger, he sent his son to do what his anger required.

This way of seeing God is nothing new. In fact it's very old. As the early church moved away from Judaism into the Greco-Roman world, it moved away from the Old Testament and into its surrounding culture. The Greco-Roman conception of God was more like the God I just described. He was certainly not a Father, particularly a loving father. And so the Greco-Roman conception of God drifted into the early church and has been there ever since. It gave rise to some pretty convoluted theology as the early church tried to reconcile the Greco-Roman conception of God to the cross of Jesus Christ.

If church had *not* moved away from the Old Testament into its surrounding culture, we would never fail to see God as a father. Just look at the book of Hosea. Hosea is a somewhat neglected book due, I think, to certain infelicities in Hosea's personal life. But that is unfortunate because Hosea gives perfect expression to the fact that God is a father, a loving father. He even helps us to understand that God's anger is not an annihilating kind of anger. It is the anger of a loving father. It is anger then laced with anguish, anger that seeks desperately to be assuaged by reconciliation with his people.

You can hear this in this morning's Old Testament lesson. The Lord speaks through Hosea: "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they turned from me; they kept sacrificing to the Ba'als and offering incense to idols. Yet it was I who taught (Israel) to walk...It took them up in my arms...I led them with cords of human kindness and bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them. But (for betraying me) they shall return to the land of Egypt and Assyria shall (now) be their king, because they have refused to return to me....But how can I give you up (Israel)? How can I hand you over?.. My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my anger....I will not come in wrath."

Now imagine, as I said, *that* God in the letting go of his son Jesus Christ. And God did not have the comfort, cold or otherwise, that his people would love him as their own. God instead had the dread and certain knowledge that they would do to him just as they did.

But God suffered *that* misery and agony, God lived that nightmare, and his son along with him, out of a father's love for his people -- so that they would in time love his son as their own and be reconciled to God through him.

And what does any of this mean for us here today? It means this. God's letting go of his son Jesus Christ was not just a past event. It is a present one too. He is with us now in spirit. And when we do not love him as our own, we grieve our father. We grieve God.

Sometimes we underestimate just how powerful God created us. The psalmist knew: "What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? You have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor." He made us powerful enough to grieve him. But that means he also created us powerful enough to comfort him. All we must do is love his son as our own. Amen.