

“Minor Prophets, Major Concerns: The Abundance of God”
November 13, 2022

Malachi 3:7-18
Luke 6:36-38

Through the words of the prophet Malachi, God cries out to the Hebrew people.

God cries out to us.

“Return to me, and I will return to you.”

We have heard these words again and again as we’ve moved through the Minor Prophets. Beginning with Hosea and Joel and concluding with Malachi, God pleads with the people and offers promise: “Return to me and I will return to you.”

The deep passion of God comes through in these words—as it does so often in the words of the Minor Prophets. I hope from this time of exploring these twelve often unheard voices, we have seen clearly and in fresh ways that the God of the prophets, the God we encounter in the Hebrew Scriptures, is not the stereotyped God of wrath and judgment but the God of merciful love, the God who longs for the well-being of human beings, created in the very image of God.

Listen once more. “Return to me, and I will return to you.” You can hear the deep yearning of the Creator for the creature, the lover for the beloved? The God of love speaks. We hear the One who will not abandon us any more than a mother will abandon her child.

The words speak of God’s desire for us.

Yes, they also suggest a separation, a distance that must be crossed. If there were no distance between us and God, there would be no need to return. If we were not aware of the separation that is sin, we would not be moved when we hear: “Return to me and I will return to you.”

Long ago the Hebrew people were driven out of Israel, taken into captivity in Babylon. Even today we know separation from what we love, alienation from God, from others, and ourselves.

We are told: “You can’t go home again.”

And yet, we hope to do just that. To return. To go back to the source of goodness and life that is God.

But how? How shall we return?

How can we bring our whole selves, all our heart and mind and strength, all that we have and all that we are before God once more?

“Test me,” says the God who calls us to return. “Bring your offerings and your tithes, and see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.” As people of faith, one reason that we give and that we seek to grow in giving is so that we might also grow in trust—trust that we are precious in God’s sight. Trust that God will not abandon God’s care for us. Trust that God’s love pours out with it more that we can ask or imagine.

Let me be clear, because some people listen to these words of Malachi and think that they have heard a formula for financial success. This is no *quid pro quo*, or, as it has been said, a “vending machine concept of God” even though some people would like to hear it that way.

The biblical scholar, Elizabeth Achtemeier, reported that several years ago now in Dade County, Florida—and *I know this sounds like* something that would happen in Florida—a man sued his church for the return of the money which he had contributed to it.

In the suit, the man said: “I delivered 800 dollars of my savings to the...Church in response to the pastor’s promise that blessing, benefits, and rewards would come to the person who did tithe 10% of his wealth. I did not and have not received those benefits.”

I don’t know how the court case went, but there’s so much wrong with this man’s understanding and action that I really don’t know where to begin.

Let me simply say that rather than taking this Floridian’s approach, we should open our eyes and our hearts to the abundance of God. In this way we discover how much we have received and grow in our ability to share with others.

So, the United Church of Christ minister, William Green, tells us: “Abundance is a fact of life, not just an article of faith. But it must be discerned to be learned, seen to be believed, experienced to be credible. Conditioned as most of us are by some sense of scarcity and not having enough, it is not immediately natural to shift our point of view. But generosity cannot take root and grow in any soil. The ground of generosity’s inspiration is abundance.”

As we move through these days that encourage and almost seem to call for a sense of scarcity, a sense of *lack*, both Malachi and Jesus bring the abundance of God to our awareness once more.

How shall we return? We are told to get more and more. We are told that the one who dies with the most toys, wins. Of course, the one who dies with the most toys, still dies—so we are called to reexamine what we call winning and living. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

“Give,” Jesus says, “and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.” Jesus sounds like the God who speaks through Malachi, doesn’t he?

But Jesus makes a connection between giving and forgiving: “Forgive,” he says, “and you will be forgiven,” only then adding, “give, and it will be given to you.”

The psychiatrist, Robert Coles, recalls a conversation he had with Anna Freud about an elderly woman’s long and troubled psychological history. Now Dr. Freud was certainly not a traditionally “religious” person. But near the end of their discussion, she paused and said: “What this woman needs is *forgiveness*. She needs to make peace with her soul, not talk about her mind. There must be a God somewhere, to help her, to hear her, to heal her. . . We certainly aren’t the ones who will be of assistance to her in that regard.”

Time and again the Minor Prophets reminded the people about what God is like: “ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.”

To say “God forgives” is to affirm that at the heart of the universe is a power that understands that human beings are imperfect, limited in our abilities, finite—*fallen*, to speak theologically—and still that power will allow us to continue, will offer us the opportunity to stumble and get up and try again, to stumble and get up and try again. . .God does not give up on us.

This, then, is the deeper abundance we need, the deeper, greater abundance that God offers.

Who indeed, but God, can forgive? Certainly, our own ability to forgive another human being springs forth from the forgiveness we have received from God, not from our own ability and goodness.

A hundred years ago many people weren't so sure about this. Everything seemed to be getting better and better. “Progress” was eliminating the concept of sin. And Congregationalists were not just jumping onto that bandwagon. We'd pretty much built the whole cart and were driving it as well. We seemed to be developing to the point that we wouldn't need to talk about sin and sinners much longer.

Some people are still stuck in the past—and they don't like to hear about sin, which seems so old-fashioned. But after the past hundred years the evidence is pretty clear: we need the abundant forgiveness of God.

It is the forgiving and giving God who calls us to return.

It is the God who is abundant in forgiving and giving who returns to us.