

# Love Inseparable: A Sermon

Nehemiah 9:16-20

Psalm 78

Romans 8:35-39

Matthew 14:13-21



Every reader of the Bible will sooner or later discover certain tensions that are hard to hold together. We discover just such a tension in this morning's lectionary readings, a tension that has been with the church since its very beginnings. In Paul's epistle to the Romans, we read one of those classic affirmations of Christian faith: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? . . . I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom. 8:35, 38-39).

Yet when we read the Old Testament readings, it seems that there are lots of things that can separate us from God's love. The two Old Testament readings are shortened selections from longer accounts of God's dealings with the people of Israel. In the Psalm we are told that after the Israelites questioned

God, "when the Lord heard, he was full of wrath; a fire was kindled against Jacob; his anger rose against Israel, because they did not believe in God and did not trust his saving power." (Ps. 78:21-22). The lectionary reading omits a good deal of what the Psalm says later, which tells over and over of how Israel kept sinning, and how God responded to Israel's sin: "[T]hey tested and rebelled against the Most High God and did not keep his testimonies . . . When God heard, he was full of wrath, and he utterly rejected Israel." (Ps. 78:56, 59). In a later section of the Nehemiah reading, we read about Israel: "they were disobedient and rebelled against you and cast your law behind their back." And Nehemiah describes God much as did the Psalm: "Therefore you gave them into the hand of their enemies, who made them suffer." (Neh. 9:26, 27). The Psalm and the passage from Nehemiah seem to say that at least some things can separate us from God's love.

Certainly there seems to be some kind of tension here between God's love and God's justice, and people have often found it difficult to hold both together. In the second century, a heretic named Marcion concluded that there were actually two different Gods – a New Testament God of love who was good, and an Old Testament God of justice who was evil. Marcion's solution to the problem was to throw out the Old Testament completely. There have been modern Christians who have come to the same conclusion. When I was doing my doctoral studies, I once heard the wife of an Episcopal priest say that the God of the Old Testament is the devil in the New Testament, and she was quite serious. If most Christians don't go quite so far, there are many Christians who, if they were honest, would admit that the God of the Old Testament sometimes makes them uncomfortable.

But if, as Christians, we take the Bible seriously, then we have to take the whole Bible seriously. In the second century, Irenaeus of Lyons was the church's first great theologian, and he insisted against Marcion that there is only one God, that

there is one Bible with two parts, an Old Testament and a New Testament, and that the God who is the God of Israel in the Old Testament is the same God who is the Father of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. In fact, Irenaeus was the first writer we know of to use the terms Old and New Testament to describe the Bible. As Anglicans, we show that we stand with Irenaeus and not Marcion by using a lectionary that includes readings from both the Old Testament and the New Testament.

How then do we hold this tension between God's love and God's justice together? I would begin by saying that the contrast between an Old Testament God of justice and a New Testament God of love is too simplistic. When people use that kind of language it means that they have not read either the Old Testament or the New Testament very carefully. Both the Old and New Testaments equally affirm first and foremost that God is love and God is good. In the New Testament, 1 John 1:48 reads, "Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love." But in the Old Testament, Psalm 34:8 says, "Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him."

If we are going to understand how the Old Testament writers think about God's goodness, we need to understand three different concepts or ideas, and we see all three in this morning's OT readings. The first is the notion of "covenant." In the ancient Near East, a covenant was an agreement or relationship between two people or two groups of people. As part of the covenant, both parties would make an agreement that included promises that each side would fulfill. Often the covenant was between a ruler and a group of people. The ruler might promise to protect the people, and in return the people would promise to be faithful to the ruler, and to not make covenants with other rulers. In the Old Testament, this covenant idea is one of the key ideas used to understand the relationship between God and the people of Israel. When God delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt, God made a covenant

with Israel, and he promised to protect them and care for them as a people. In return, Israel promised to be faithful to God and to worship no other gods. Jeremiah 30:22 sums up the covenant in these words: "And you shall be my people, and I will be your God." We find this notion of covenant in an earlier section of the Nehemiah reading that we did not read this morning: "You are the Lord, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham. You found his heart faithful before you, and made with him the covenant to give to his offspring the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Perizzite, the Jebusite, and the Girgashite. And you have kept your promise, for you are righteous." (Nehemiah 9:7-8).

Another two notions are closely tied to covenant: loving kindness and holiness. "Loving kindness" is the English translation of the Hebrew word "*hesed*." There is no real correct English translation. It is sometimes translated "loving kindness" and sometimes as "steadfast love." In Exodus, when God appeared to Moses on Mt. Sinai, he said: "[I am] The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." (Exodus 34:6). In Deuteronomy, God addressed the people of Israel, "It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations . . ." (Deut. 7:7-9). We find this concept of "loving kindness" or "steadfast love" in this morning's Nehemiah passage as well: "[Y]ou are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love . . ." (Nehemiah 9:17).

So, first, God has made a covenant with Israel, and this covenant is based entirely on God's loving kindness or steadfast love. *Hesed* or loving kindness is the word that describes the benevolence of this covenant relationship.

But this leads to the second aspect of the covenant relationship. Both partners in a covenant are expected to show *hesed* or "steadfast love" to one another, not simply God, but also Israel. This leads to the second side of how the Old Testament describes God's goodness, holiness. In the Old Testament, because God is good, God is also holy. There is nothing evil or unloving in God, and when God enters into a covenant with Israel, he expects his covenant people to be like him. As part of his covenant with Israel, God gives them a law, and God's expectation of holiness is illustrated in what are called the two tables of the ten commandments. As Jesus made clear, the ten commandments can be summed up in two Old Testament laws. Deuteronomy 6:5 reads: "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might," and Leviticus 19:18 reads "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." As Jesus said, "On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets." (Matt. 22:40).

So when God made his covenant with Israel, he gave them a set of commandments, a law, and he commanded them "Be holy as I am holy." (Leviticus 19:1). This morning's Psalm describes the covenant this way: "He established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children . . . so that they should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments." (Psalm 78:5-7).

But we know how that turned out. In the Old Testament, God is really good at keeping his side of the covenant, but Israel is often really bad at it. When Moses climbed up Mt. Sinai to receive the stone tablets on which the ten commandments were written, the people almost immediately built a golden calf and

worshiped it. "These are the gods," they said, "who brought us out of Egypt." (Ex. 32:4).

The story of the Old Testament is largely the story of how God always keeps his side of the covenant, but Israel repeatedly failed to do so. That is the central theme of this morning's readings. The Psalmist writes, "They did not keep God's covenant, but refused to walk according to his law. They forgot his works and the wonders that he had shown them." (Psalm 78:10-11). Similarly, in Nehemiah, we read: "But they and our fathers acted presumptuously and stiffened their neck and did not obey your commandments. They refused to obey and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them, but they stiffened their neck and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt." (Nehemiah 9:16-17).

And so this is the source of the tension between God's love and God's justice. It is not that there are two Gods, an Old Testament God of justice and a New Testament God of love. Nor is God like a bad parent or spouse, sometimes in a good mood and sometimes in a bad mood, and you can never be sure which. Rather, throughout the Old Testament, God is portrayed as being the God of *hesed*, the God of loving kindness or steadfast love who loves Israel and keeps his covenant. However, the people consistently forget the covenant, and disobey it, and so there is a tension. The tension, however is not in God himself, but between God and his covenant people. If you've ever read the Old Testament all the way through, you have probably noticed that this theme of Israel's failure to keep the covenant is perhaps the central theme in all of the books between Judges and 2 Kings, and it is certainly a key theme in the writings of the OT prophets.

Given Israel's failure to keep the covenant, we might expect that God would respond with judgment – and we certainly find this theme of judgment in this morning's readings. In the Psalm, we're told that God's "anger rose against Israel, because they did not believe in God and did not trust his

saving power.” (Ps. 78:21-22), and later in Nehemiah, we read: “Therefore you gave them into the hand of their enemies, who made them suffer.” (Neh. 9:27).

However, judgment is not the final answer to the problem of Israel’s disobedience to the covenant. If *hesed* is the beginning of the covenant, then *hesed* is also the conclusion of the covenant. *Hesed* means not only that loving kindness is the beginning of the covenant, but that God’s loving kindness fulfills the covenant even when Israel fails to do so.

And so, there are two new notions that need to be introduced into the discussion, one that appears in the Old Testament, and one that really has to wait until the New Testament. The first notion is something radically new, “mercy.” God’s *hesed*, God’s loving kindness, means that God shows faithfulness to the covenant even when Israel disobeys. God continues to show loving kindness by forgiving and having mercy. We see this particularly in the Nehemiah passage: “Even when they had made for themselves a golden calf and said, ‘This is your God who brought you up out of Egypt,’ and had committed great blasphemies, you in your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness. . . . You gave your good Spirit to instruct them and did not withhold your manna from their mouth and gave them water for their thirst.” (Neh. 9:18-20) And so we find that *hesed* or loving kindness means that God does not give up on Israel even if Israel fails to hold up their end of the covenant. In Isaiah, God insists that his covenant is eternal, despite Israel’s unfaithfulness: “‘For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed,’ says the Lord, who has compassion on you.” (Is. 54:8, 10).

But this need for God to transform loving kindness to mercy shows an inherent problem with the covenant. What happens to the covenant if one member continually fails to keep the covenant? Can there be a covenant with only one partner? In

Jeremiah 31, we find that Israel's failure to keep up their end of the covenant means that God will have to solve the problem in his own way: "Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord." The new covenant solves the problem of Israel's disobedience in two ways: First, God will create a faithful covenant partner who will obey his law from the heart: "For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people." And, second, God will keep his end of the covenant by showing mercy. "For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." (Jer. 31:31-34).

And this is where we must finally turn to the New Testament, and the second new notion, what the New Testament calls "grace" or the "gospel." The Old Testament ends with this promise of a solution to the problem of the unfaithful covenant partner, but the promise is left hanging. However, when we turn to the good news of the gospel, we find that in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, God has himself fulfilled the promise, and solved the problem of the unfaithful partner by himself becoming the faithful covenant partner. And this is what the New Testament calls "grace."

At the beginning of Paul's letter to the Romans, Paul expands on the problem of the unfaithful covenant partner by arguing that we are all in the place of Israel. In the face of God's goodness and holiness, none of us can claim to be holy or righteous or innocent – we are all unfaithful covenant partners – and yet God in Christ has become the perfect covenant partner to do what we could not do. Paul writes



“There is no difference [between Jew and Gentile], for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.” (Rom. 3:22-23). So the covenant God of Israel in the Old Testament is now also the covenant God of Gentiles. Paul writes: “is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one—who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.” In 2 Corinthians, Paul makes clear that God has solved the problem of our unfaithfulness as covenant partners by God himself becoming the faithful covenant partner in Christ: “For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Cor. 5:21). Because Jesus Christ is fully God, he is able to represent the divine side of the covenant, but because he is also fully human, he is able to be the faithful human covenant partner as well.

It is also through Jesus that God is able to keep the two sides of the promise of the new covenant that God made in the book of Jeremiah. First, there is mercy. In Romans 5:8, Paul writes, “but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Paul goes on to write, “For if, while we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!” (v. 10). In Romans 8:32, Paul asks, “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” As God promised in the book of Jeremiah, because of what he has done in Jesus Christ, he will remember our sins no more.

Then, there is the second half of the promise in Jeremiah. “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” Because we are united to Jesus Christ in baptism, we share in the power of his death and resurrection. Again, Paul wrote:

“We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” (Romans 6:2). Paul goes on to say that because we are united to Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection, God has given us his Holy Spirit to live within us, and this solves the problems of both sides of the unfaithful covenant partner: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. . . . By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, [God] condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” (Rom. 8:1-4). For Christians, there is both forgiveness of sins, and a participation in Christ’s own death and resurrection that enables us to be faithful covenant partners, to live a new life by walking according to the Holy Spirit who now lives inside us.

I realize that I have covered a lot of material, and I could say a lot more. The main point that I want to make clear is that we do not have to worry about whether we can trust God. There are not two Gods, a God of love who can sometimes be trusted, and a God of justice who must rather be feared. Rather, there is the one faithful and loving God of *hesed*, the God of steadfast love or loving kindness who made a covenant with Israel and has fulfilled that covenant in Jesus Christ. Despite Israel’s failure to keep the covenant, and our own failures, our own sinfulness, God is faithful to his promises and never ceases to love us. The good news of the gospel is that in Jesus Christ, God himself has become the faithful covenant partner, and in Jesus, God has done for us what we could not do for ourselves. And so we can conclude this sermon by reciting with confidence the words of Paul in this morning’s epistle reading: “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or

persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? . . .  
. No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through  
him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life,  
nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come,  
nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all  
creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in  
Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom. 8:35-39).