Grow Up

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Malachi 4:1-6

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This summer, we have been walking through the twelve Minor Prophets and this morning we come to the last one, Malachi. If you have been following this series you get the feeling these weren’t the most fun-loving bunch of guys. Actually, while they clearly loved our Lord and the joy God can bring into our lives, these prophets all wrote during periods when the Hebrew people needed someone to get them back on track. Malachi wrote his short four-chapter book around 450 years before Jesus Christ and was the last of the formal prophets. The nation of Israel was no longer in exile at that time but life back in their home country and hometowns wasn’t easy. They had to dig and scratch to survive in a dry and weary land. The spiritual condition of the nation was poor, their priests were corrupt, and the people were apathetic about their faith and pretty much just going through the motions. They call to mind the words of Isaiah that Jesus quoted, “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me” (Matthew 15:8).

As I read Malachi several times in the last weeks, it called to mind a story I read in eighth grade English about an Irishman who retired from a career that was not specified early in the story. He and his wife quietly began to raise a family on a farm. A neighbor of his began to make excessive demands and the Irishman quietly turned him away every time. Then, one day, as the neighbor, in a fit of rage, began to pummel this quiet Irishman with his fists, the story went into wonderful detail, at least from to my eighth grade perspective. The Irishman dropped into his old familiar stance, stiffened his wrists and hit that man under the chin so hard and so many times that he lifted him clear off the ground and drove him off the property. Turns out he was the Irish national boxing champion. That’s Malachi! His name in Hebrew literally means “My Messenger,” and as God’s messenger he writes to the boorish, godless, apathetic people of Israel and lets ‘em have it. In our way of talking today he’d be saying, “Grow up!”

Malachi wrote his book as a dialogue between God and God’s people in order to address several different matters. A few which really stand out are: the nature of their practices of giving to God, the nature of their marriages and divorces, the nature of their parenting, among many others.

Malachi starts right off with the corruptness of the priests in the way they made their offerings to God. You can hear this dialogue between God and the priests. Chapter 1:6: “A son honors his father, and servants their master. If then I am a father, where is the honor due to me? And if I am a
master, where is the respect due to me? says the Lord of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name. You say, ‘How have we despised your name?’ 7 By offering polluted food on my altar. And you say, ‘How have we polluted it?’ By thinking that the Lord’s table may be despised. 8 When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not wrong? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not wrong? Try presenting that to your governor; will he be pleased with you or show you favor? says the Lord of hosts.” They were offerings given without a heart of worship and that cost them little.

In Chapter 3, Malachi again picks up this theme of what are appropriate sacrificial gifts, but extends his concerns from the priests to all the people. 9 “Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, ‘How are we robbing you?’ In your tithes and offerings! 10 You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me—the whole nation of you! 11 Bring the full [10 percent] tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.”

So Malachi wants us to grow up in our giving. When we look at all of scripture we find five basic patterns of generosity, all of which are an expression of true heart worship and of our trust in God to meet our own needs. Briefly, the first of those five patterns is The Hilaros Principle. The word translated cheerful in the famous verse, “God loves a cheerful giver,” is the Greek word hilaros which means so much more than cheerfulness. It’s the root of our word hilarious. The Hilaros Principle is about giving with a sense of hilarity, of great joy. If you have been on Facebook at all in the last few days you have seen countless video clips of people pouring buckets of ice water over their heads in response to the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge which has raised over 41 million dollars for ALS. In every case, you can see their joy in this generosity. That’s hilaros. And yes, I was challenged too!

The second pattern of generosity is The Principle of First Fruits. The Hebrew farmer gave to the Lord from the first of the harvest and not from what was left over. Our gifts come off the top with hilaros and not the bottom as we trust our Lord to meet our needs. The third pattern is Proportional Giving. We are invited to give with hilaros proportionally, a percent of our income, with the 10 percent tithe as a clear pattern for God’s people. As God said, “...so there will be food in my house...”
(Malachi 3:10), the capacity to feed people spiritually and physically. I remember Pete telling me that after mentioning the 10 percent tithe in a sermon a couple of years ago, one dear person came up and said, “I’ve never done the math. There is no reason I couldn’t be giving that amount!” Whether you give the 10 percent tithe or decide deliberately to grow to the tithe or offer some other amount, its clear that we are to give whatever we give with hilaros – hilarity – joy.

Pattern four is Offerings of Generosity. These are the gifts you give because God melts your heart about something. It could be related to the church but it could be for some other need—such as the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge or the MS Society or CCH (the Community Coalition for Haiti). An offering of generosity, not a percentage of your income gift, it is simply what your melted heart moves you to give. Finally, pattern five, Almsgiving. The alm was a bit of money offered secretly to people in need during the time of Jesus. Jesus said to give it so quietly that your right hand doesn’t know what your left hand is doing. It’s the gift you give to someone you know or meet who has some deep need that you can help with, even if only a little bit—but you give the gift in a way that only you know you gave it.

What bothered Malachi were people who simply accepted the hilaros gifts of God into their own lives and then pretended to give some of it back to God when they actually kept it for themselves. What would move you and me to give using any of these five patterns? Clearly our hilaros is inspired by the hilaros and joy of our God. So, in that spirit of hilaros, we pass it on or in the language of today, you “pay it forward” to bless many others the way you have been blessed yourself.

After challenging us to grow up in our giving, Malachi, like the Irish boxer, moves right along to land another blow to the chin, this one focusing on the declining respect for marriage in his day and the encouragement for those who are married to grow up in that aspect of our living. “14 … the Lord was a witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. 15 Did not one God make her? Both flesh and spirit are his. And what does the one God desire? Godly offspring. So look to yourselves, and do not let anyone be faithless to the wife of his youth.”

Of course, in those times women could not initiate divorce proceedings, which is why Malachi is speaking to the men. Yet his concern certainly
applies to all of us today. When Malachi uses the Hebrew word translated faithless, it is often translated treacherous. In other words, to be faithless is a betrayal and the pain can be overwhelming. The concept of faithful-ness is actually bound up in another Hebrew word, hesed, which is typically translated steadfast love, lovingkindness and faithfulness. I like to understand it this way, hesed means “I will never remove my love from you. Never.” That’s faithfulness.

When Prince Charles and Lady Diana were married some years ago, their wedding took place at something like four in the morning our time. Ann Marie announced she was going to watch it. I wanted to watch it, too. I didn’t want to admit it, so I said I would get up at four a.m. to keep her company! In the middle of the service, Charles and Diana were standing in front of the Archbishop of Canterbury, the presiding pastor. The Archbishop said to Charles, “Do you plight your troth to Diana?” I thought to myself, “plight your troth?” Well, I knew that plight meant pledge, pledge or promise your troth, but I wondered, “What is a troth? I wondered, “Do I have one? Did I pledge it to Ann Marie when we were married?” So, as the wedding continued, I pulled Webster’s Dictionary off the shelf. “Troth,” is Old English for faithful. Now that made sense. It’s all about loving with the same kind of love our God loves us with because our Lord says to you, “I will never, ever, withdraw my love from you.” That is why the wedding service centers on the word faithful. It’s all about hesed. “I will never, ever withdraw my love from you.”

We know what happens when we break hesed and break faithfulness, which was Malachi’s concern. Just think about what happened to Charles and Diana. When speaking about marriage, the Book of Genesis offers the classic statement, “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). Sometimes the word is translated as clings, clings to his wife, or is translated to cleave, join or hold fast. It’s actually a Hebrew word that means to glue. So the husband and wife are glued together like two pieces of paper are glued. When you try to separate them, the paper shreds which is why divorce is such a painful experience. No wonder Malachi wants us to be faithful! Keep hesed!

The last few verses of Malachi are actually a wonderful summary of the major message of the Minor Prophets. There is a day coming, the Day of the Lord, which indeed will be a day of justice and judgment for all of
humanity and a day of rejoicing for God’s people. “1 See, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. 2 But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.” When you read the Minor Prophets, certainly when you read what Malachi has to say about giving and about marriage and other matters, if you are the least bit humble, you know right away that neither you nor any of us have been pure in these things.

It is why I love Romans, Chapter 8, which begins with, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” No matter how you may find your behavior less than worthy of the Lord who loves you, the fact is he does love you. Now is a great time to begin to reflect his hilaros and his hesed in your own life!

Malachi, indeed the entire Old Testament, ends with these words of God, “5 Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. 6 He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.”

In this word about Elijah, we see a bridge to the days of Jesus and the New Testament. In speaking about John the Baptist, Jesus said, “and if you are willing to accept it, he [John] is Elijah who is to come” (Matthew 11:14). It is marvelous that Malachi’s final word has to do with our homes. How we grow up, how we live out lives of hilaros—generosity and of hesed—faithfulness, begins at home. May you and your home know the joy of the Lord in these, the days of Elijah!