

THE HOLY ONE IN OUR MIDST

Hosea 11:1-11

First Presbyterian Church of Georgetown, Texas

Dr. Michael A. Roberts August 1, 2010

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¹When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. ²The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols. ³Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. ⁴I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them. ⁵They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me. ⁶The sword rages in their cities, it consumes their oracle-priests, and devours because of their schemes. ⁷My people are bent on turning away from me. To the Most High they call, but he does not raise them up at all.

⁸How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. ⁹I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath. ¹⁰They shall go after the LORD, who roars like a lion; when he roars, his children shall come trembling from the west. ¹¹They shall come trembling like birds from Egypt, and like doves from the land of Assyria; and I will return them to their homes, says the Lord.

Many of you know that I had a personal loss while I was gone. My Dad died on the evening of July 3. His heart and lungs finally gave out after a long illness. He had been on Hospice care since last October. He was 83. I was very glad to have time while away to begin the grieving process. As many of you have told me over the years, it is a very different situation in life when both of your parents are gone. My mother died back in 1983. I'm slowly adjusting to this new situation in life.

I appreciate your prayer and thoughts. Many of you sent us cards and I am grateful. Those cards were very meaningful to me. They have sustained me and encouraged me over the last several weeks. I appreciate your thoughtfulness.

This is my first Sunday back after my summer vacation and study leave. I did have a good time away. My family and I were able to get away for several short trips around Texas. I enjoyed reading a stack of books. As usual, I filled up on baseball and movies. I enjoyed life at a much slower, more relaxed pace, and got some good rest. During my study leave weeks, I mostly worked on my sermons for the coming year. As always, it is good to be back with you in worship.

The Old Testament reading from the lectionary today is Hosea 11. The theme of the passage is that God is like a divine parent. I chose this text back in the spring.

Hosea's ministry took place in the eighth century B.C. Most scholars date his ministry about 730 B.C., about 250 years after King David. He spoke prophetically to the Northern Kingdom, called Israel, also called Ephraim throughout this passage. Hosea watched as Israel declined in influence and in their relationship to God. Hosea stands in our Bibles as one of the minor prophets. By the way, they were called minor prophets not because they were less significant but because they were shorter in length than the major prophets of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.

Hosea was a unique prophet in two ways: he was a tenderhearted, sympathetic person and he brings phenomenal literary gifts to the task of writing. Hosea is known as one of the first writing prophets. It is Hosea's passion and pain that he "lets loose in speech after speech, irony after irony, metaphor after metaphor, which gives the book its fire. It is the fire of this passion and its message that confronts the reader with Israel's Lord (David Hubbard)."

The book of Hosea begins with a marriage. Hosea's marriage. Hosea married because he heard the word of God and his marriage would eventually be a dramatic, powerful example of how God relates to his people.

Hosea would marry a woman who was unfaithful. As 1:2 says in stark language: "*Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness* (NIV), because this is exactly what I, the Lord, have married in pledging myself to you. Hosea's marriage was marked by tragedy and recovery beyond the tragedy. This tragedy in his own marriage deepened his understanding of God's relationship to us. The story is told in chapters 1 to 3 of Hosea.

They had three children together with ominous names. Literally the kids' names were "God sows punishment", "God has no pity", "you are not my people." Uplifting, positive names.

The children's names describe the judgment that will eventually come upon Israel. The heart of this book, chapters 4 through 10, are speeches from Hosea describing God's judgment upon the northern kingdom. By the time you get to chapter 11, you are weary of all the judgment and ready for a little mercy and compassion. And this is what we find.

There are two critical images in this book: one is of marriage, the other is of parenting. God as our parent is the theme of chapter 11. In chapter 11, the metaphor applied to God is that of a caring parent rather than a loving husband. The metaphor for Israel is the rebellious son instead of the adulterous wife (*New Interpreter's Bible* VII p. 277).

There are few scenes of tenderness in the Bible that match vv. 1-4: "*When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.* ²*The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols.* ³*Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them.* ⁴*I led them with cords of human*

kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them."

These verses recall the early years of parenting. When a toddler starts to walk and they fall, scraping their knee or bumping their head. Mom or Dad take them up in their arms, kiss the bump, reassuring the child of our love. God says "I led with *human kindness, with bands of love... I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks*". God is the tender, loving, compassionate parent.

God loves us just like a parent does. Tenderly, caringly, sympathetically. And God also hurts like a parent does. Verse 2 reads: "*2The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols.*" Even when they faced desperate times, God declares "*they have refused to return to me... My people are bent on turning away from me*".

We get a glimpse here. When we ignore God, not only does it hurt us but it also hurts God. God has feelings you know! It is probably true of relationships that the closer and deeper a relationship is, the more the possibility for hurt. Hurt is more devastating after 30 years of friendship than it is in a casual relationship.

We know that when we have invested years into a family relationship, a marriage, or as a parent- when we are ignored, the pain is very powerful. I've talked with parents who have invested 18 years in a child's life and then were ignored or hurt. The pain runs deep.

At least one commentator (James Limburg) thinks that the imagery here is from Hosea's own personal experience with his children. It is possible that his three children would have just gone through the teenage years (and parents know what that's like!).

God had invested over 1000 years (so to speak) in parenting and befriending Israel and at times was simply ignored. The people were unfaithful by chasing other gods. God has invested a lifetime in us. We may be aware of it or not. There are times when we go through our days not even thinking of God. That has to hurt God. To say God is personal means God is a being with real feelings. To sense that God wants a personal relationship with us allows us to be anguished at the sometimes cavalier way we treat God.

In Hosea, ultimately God is love and wants to have a relationship with us. What an opportunity we often miss. God desires to be involved in our lives. Connected. Related. Like a member of our own family. God wants to be communicated with, conferred with, concerns shared with. God wants a relationship, a real relationship with us.

Will you reflect with me a moment about this in your own life? It doesn't matter whether you're a member or not, whether you've been a Christian for six months or sixty years.

Where is God in your life at this moment? In what ways do we see God moving? Do I give God the time that I would expect to give to any relationship? When it comes to making key decisions do I consult all my friends and ignore God? When I am hurting do I cry on everyone's shoulder except God's? When good things happen, do I celebrate with my friends and never thank God? As with any family member- do I stay in touch? Hosea teaches us how very much God wants to be an enriching, fulfilling, nurturing relationship with you and me.

There is a final message in Hosea which provides hope. Hosea reminds us afresh of God's astounding love and mercy.

More moving even than verses 1-4 of our text are verses 8 and 9. *"⁸How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim?"* (According to Deuteronomy 29:23 Admah and Zeboiim were small towns that were destroyed along with Sodom and Gomorrah). How can I treat you like that? *"My heart, God says, "recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. ⁹I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath."*

God, full of compassion and mercy can not come to the point of destroying Israel. God as our loving parent draws back from the horror of it all, and, having placed judgment and mercy in the balance, decides in favor of mercy (*Texts for Preaching Year C* p. 451).

It is a normal human reaction when we have been hurt and ignored to lash out, to be angry. In Hosea, God will not respond that way. God will express compassion and mercy. God is the Holy One. Different from mere mortals.

How can I give you up? We are God's people. God can't give up on us. God loves us still. Love is God's nature. As 1 John 4:8 says "*God is love.*" If God were to stop loving then God would cease to be God. Love is God's essential nature.

(The following is quoted and adapted from Wendy Joyner "Divine Parenting" in *The Abingdon Preaching Annual 2007* pp. 201-202):

"In our struggles to be the children of God, I think we sometimes forget that our heavenly Parent is different from our earthly parents. We project earthly attributes onto God and set limits upon God's grace. We think in terms of justice, and the limits of what we as humans can do and provide for our children. As human parents, we realize that we cannot fix everything. We become frustrated after a lifetime of granting second chances. We can despair that the ending is always the same. In our humanness, we eventually give up hope that we, or others, could ever really be fully restored.

Praise God that we have a divine Parent whose love knows no limit, and whose nature is to continue granting forgiveness! This is good news for a world full of sinners like us. We look at our own lives and realize that we have a long way to go in our faith journeys. Time and time again, we sin, we ask forgiveness, we repent, and we seek to live as God calls us to live—and then we sin again. Maybe we think, there is a point where God will give up on us, a point where justice will outweigh grace and mercy.

Yet the good news is that, unlike human parents, God is indeed “God and no mortal” (v. 9). God says “my compassion grows warm and tender...I will not give up on you. I will welcome you home.” Much like the father in the parable of the prodigal son, God welcomes us with open arms. God demonstrates divine parenting, a parenting that is far above anything we can experience here on earth.

This is the gift of Hosea’s proclamation, and the gift the church can also offer to a world that is hurting. Our ministries would be transformed if we truly believed and lived the powerful good news of this story. Our churches would be revitalized and changed in radical ways if we truly began proclaiming the good news that no one is beyond the reach of God’s tender mercies and compassion.

The family of God is made up of all of us, especially those who, in our human way of seeing, appear to be beyond redemption. The sons and daughters of God include those who are faithful as well as those who are faithless. It is God’s divine parenting that claims all of us who seek relationship after we have lost our way. It is God’s love that welcomes us home, over and over and over again.”

PRAYER

Loving and Holy God, we are grateful. For your compassion and mercy. For your forgiveness and the second chances. Help us to hear your good news, to sense your love. Help us then, to be transformed by your love into your loving people. To serve and care and to follow your will for our lives. Amen.

