

GOD'S RECYCLABLE LOVE

Hosea 11:1-9

PENTECOST 22

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In this time of firsts and lasts for me, this morning we read exclusively from the prophet, Hosea. This will be the first time I have ever preached on the first of the so-called “Minor Prophets.” It will also be my only, or last time to preach about Hosea before this worshipping congregation, for whom I have been privileged to preach the Word and preside at worship for almost 34 years. As the Fall season of Narrative Lectionary readings from the Old Testament begin to wind down, we meet Hosea, whose prophetic message is still important and apropos for today.

Two summers ago, the chaplain at The Shores at Wesley Manor invited me to do a Bible study on several books from the section of the Bible called ‘The Minor Prophets, which immediately follows the four ‘Major Prophets’ — Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel. Since the prophecy of Hosea comes first in the order of the twelve ‘Minor Prophets,’ I begin there. I remember researching for this assignment, and coming upon what one commentator said about it: **“Hosea is the second greatest story in the Bible.”** No Christian can argue that the greatest story in the Bible is the story of the incarnation, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. However, the story of Hosea is second, because it prefigures and anticipates the Christ story.

Hosea was a prophet-preacher during the reigns of four successive kings of Judah, the oldest and most southern of the two Jewish states. He lived during the reign of Jeroboam, one of the kings of the Northern State that seceded from Judah. It must have been a long period of ministry, perhaps fifty or sixty years, but Hosea says nothing about his personal life, except his marriage, with which his prophecy begins. Hosea tells us that the first time GOD spoke to him, He said: (and now I

am going to read from Eugene Peterson's translation, The Message, which pulls no punches).

“Find a whore and marry her. Make this whore the mother of your children. And here's why: The whole country has become a whorehouse, unfaithful to Me, GOD.”

Hosea did what God requested of him. He picked Gomer, and she bore three children. God told him to name their first son, 'Jezreel,' for ***“I'll make the people of Israel pay for the massacre at Jezreel. I'm calling it quits on the Kingdom of Israel.”*** Next, Gomer gave birth to a daughter, and God told Hosea, ***“Name this one 'No-Mercy.' I am fed up with Israel. I have run out of mercy. There's no more forgiveness.”*** After Gomer weaned No-Mercy, she got pregnant yet again, and had another son. God said to Hosea, ***“Name him 'Nobody.' You've become nobodies to Me, and I, GOD, am nobody to you.”***

A beginning like this should tempt us to open our Bibles and see how this story plays out. But first, let me inform you that the age of Hosea was much like ours today, and the lessons of his story shouldn't be lost on us. Otherwise, we are likely to be moved by this story, much the same way we'd be moved by any novel, movie, or play. However, we would probably write it off as having little or nothing to do with us. Hosea, whose name means *'salvation,'* lived at the same time Isaiah prophesied to Judah and Amos was sent north to Israel.

It is from these three prophets, then, that we learn about the characteristics of this age. We might say, as Dickens said about his age at the opening of his novel, A Tale of Two Cities, ***“It was the best of times”*** as well as ***“the worst of times.”*** To a minority of the population, the period was a good one politically, economically, and socially. It was an age of luxurious materialism, apparent religious devotion and activity, freedom, and even national security, in which politics, law, wealth, and religion all played into the favored peoples' hands. Amos is particularly clear in diagnosing his age. Along with Isaiah and Hosea, it was also the worst of times, because the hearts of the people were empty, their religion was shallow, and corruption was rampant everywhere.

In particular, law was manipulated to the advantage of the elite, and much of the religious activity was mere show. Hosea's cry was that the people had been unfaithful to God, just as an adulterous wife is unfaithful to her husband. God had blessed his people, and prospered them both materially and spiritually. But they had begun to live for pleasure. They had abandoned hard work, morality, and integrity, in order to live for themselves.

Can such things be said about our age? We live in an age where academia has abandoned the ideals, values, and culture of Christianity, and of Western civilization itself. One person who saw this very clearly was another prophet-like personage — the brilliant Russian author, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who was a harsh critic of what communism did to his own country. Anyone who has read his Gulag Archipelago knows. Yet, he was also highly critical of the West, where he took refuge. Solzhenitsyn's address to the graduates of Harvard University in the spring of 1978 almost paralleled Hosea's harsh critique of Israel. He told his audience, **“After the suffering of decades of violence and oppression, the human soul longs for things higher, warmer, and purer than those offered by today's mass living habits, introduced by the revolting invasion of publicity, by TV stupor, and by intolerable music . . . We have turned our backs upon the Spirit and embraced all that is material with excessive and unwarranted zeal.”**

So now, we come to today's reading from the Eleventh Chapter of Hosea. In this, the prophecy of Hosea comes full circle, and parallels in its structure the story of the marriage on which it is constructed. The story of Hosea and Gomer's marriage has three phases. There is the so-called “honeymoon” period of love and happiness. There is the period of Gomer's unfaithfulness, in which the course of her life was a continual downward spiral. During this phase, Hosea continued to love his wife and provide for her, but her dissolute and promiscuous life-style led her into increasing poverty and, eventually, into slavery.

The third phase is seen in Hosea's act of redemption, in which he purchased his wife in the slave market, thereby restoring her forever. Hosea said in that day, ***"You are to live with me many days; you must not be a prostitute or be intimate with any man, and I will live with you"*** (3:3). On the basis of that analysis, we can say that the last four chapters of Hosea correspond to stage three. The love of God has been present all along, but from Chapters Four through Ten, the words of discipline and judgment predominate. Now, although judgment is still present, the emphasis now falls on God's prevailing, unquenchable, and, what I call "recyclable love." And what an amazing love this is! Throughout Chapter Eleven, Hosea writes of the love of God in reference to Israel's past, present, and future. But in each case, there are surprises. The love of God does not operate as we think it should. It is because God is ***"God and not man"*** (v9) that God acts differently.

The problem in today's text is a rebellious child. Loved by its Father, cared for in all ways, and yet the child flaunts his hatred. The image of rebellion was sacrificing to other gods, offering incense to idols. But the child never knows God, or even bothers to. It refuses again and again to return to the God who truly loves him. How many of us have ever had troublesome, rebellious children, teens, or adults? No matter how you offer them love, no matter how you feed them, care for them, even guide them, they still make bad choices. Sometimes it's sarcastic back talk or ignorant indifference. Sometimes it's harmful and destructive behavior. Whatever it is, it breaks a parent's heart, doesn't it?

Old Testament commentator, Michael Chan, puts it this way. He says, ***"The poet (meaning Hosea) draws on imagery from across the spectrum, as if grasping desperately for a metaphor, no matter how inadequate, to capture the turmoil brewing in God's heart."*** Like most parents, God would do anything to save His child from the child's bad behavior, from misspent days, and a broken spirit. A parent posted about her son's destructive behavior: ***"Loving someone who is abusing drugs regularly is hell. Loving someone in the grips***

of mental illness to the point of self-sabotage and suicide is hell. Loving someone who is throwing away relationships with those who love them, including their own child, is hell. Loving someone who is unreachable despite your best efforts, despite your love for them . . . someone who persistently refuses to find a rock bottom — that's hell."

Does God have a breaking point, a point where God stops chasing after His lost children? According to Hosea, no. Even after Israel breaks God's heart, God exclaims, "*How can I give you up? How can I hand you over?*" Even in hell, God won't give up. Do you know what that means for you and me? It means that, even when we do the things we hate, God won't hate us. It means that even when we disappoint our family, our loved ones, we are always loved. Even in our sin, God's love, understanding, and compassion grows.

Beloved people of God — you ARE beloved by God. However, God's love does not simply affirm who and what we are. God's love is a transforming love. We have a God who loves us enough to accept us as we are. That same God loves us enough not to leave us as He finds us. Indeed, our Gospel is not one of affirmation, it's a Gospel of transformation. Hosea knew the problem, but he didn't know much about how God would solve the problem. As Hosea's own name suggests, God would save his people by the One, Whose own name meant He will save His people — Jesus. In Jesus, God recycles His love for those who have been rebellious and drifting or sinking away. His love will love you like a prodigal son or daughter, and welcome you home in his love forever.

AMEN