

A Prostitute, a Prophet, a People and a Prayer

Hosea 1:2--10 and Luke 11:1-13

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Rev. Leah Fowler, Interim Pastor

I will begin this sermon by telling you that I find the book of Hosea both maddening and fascinating. Because of its offensive nature, I considered not touching it at all and doing what most of my clergy friends are doing this morning: preaching on the gospel text only, which is indeed very good and very rich.

But there is something about unruly texts that attract me like a moth to a flame. It is usually the scriptures that make me bristle and tempt me to pull out my scissors and put them to the text that challenge me to think more deeply about human striving toward God. In that sense, perhaps Hosea and I do have something in common.

You see, Hosea was also drawn, like a moth to a flame, toward the unruly-- but in the prophet's case, the unruly recipient of Hosea's love was a woman, Gomer, a woman Hosea finds and marries because God tells Hosea to "Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord." (Hos. 1:2).

So here's where the trouble comes in my reading of the text. God asks Hosea to purposefully seek out someone he considers promiscuous, and marry her, and have children with her, to prove a point. It is questionable whether the prophet actually did this, or whether he was just spinning this story as an allegory to shock and make a point. It is my hope that God did not use Hosea, Gomer, and their children in this way.

A prophet of that time used all that was available in the cultural soup to grab attention and to make a point. Think of Lady Gaga's dress made of raw meat-- I believe it was flank steak-- she wore to the MTV Video Music Awards several years ago. It made a statement; it was distasteful; and it grabbed the public's attention. Decades later, I imagine that dress will not be forgotten by anyone between the ages of 6 and 60 in America in 2010.

But a woman and her children are not a dress made of meat. They are human beings, even children of God. Whether or not Gomer was a professional prostitute does not give Hosea the right to objectify her and the children they bring into the world to prove a point. For Hosea, naming his firstborn “Jezreel” would be like me today naming my firstborn “9/11.” Jezreel not only means “God sows;” Jezreel also is the site of a massacre of King Joram of Israel, his mother, family members and supporters. He names his daughter, at God’s command, “Loruhamah,” which means “no mercy.” And his third-born, a son, he names “Lo-ammi” which means “not my people.”

At this point in the text, the story shifts from being about Hosea and Gomer to being about God and Israel. The metaphor reveals that Israel has been unfaithful to God. Historically, we know that Israel under the leadership of Jehu aligns itself with Assyria. Hosea the prophet saw this alliance as an idolatrous rejection of the Lord. The political alliances lent themselves also to the cultural assimilation that threatened the identity of Israel. Baal worship, based on a fertility cult, put the power of creation into human sexual rites rather than attributing all creative power to God. In fact, some scholars suggest that Gomer was actually a temple prostitute, a holy woman whose call it was to act out the ecstatic union of the gods so that the fields would be fertile.

This indeed is an unruly text and it reveals the unruliness of God’s nature. Perhaps some of us prefer a God who is controlled, a stoic God whose nature is not tied to our actions. But here, Hosea hands us a God who is subject to the same sorrows, anger and longing we feel in our own human relationships.

Last week I visited some friends out west on my way out to the conference I attended. Julie and Dan’s daughter Ada is two years old. How fast time flies and we forget how terrible two can be!. But little Ada reminded me. Hosea’s efforts at grabbing the people’s attention have the same effect as my daughter Kai’s tantrums once were, and are just as terrible. Kai, when she was two and did not get her way-- let’s say her other mom Chris won’t read the same book to her for the 11th time, or I put her clothes on for her when she wants to do it all by herself but we’re in a hurry-- would take it to the floor. She’d go boneless so that we could not possibly pick her up, so all there’d be left for

us to do is to let her go horizontal, one with the floor, which she'd pound and kick until there is no fight left in her. And then, just as quickly as it started, she would start singing to herself and looking around-- still lying down, but by that point relaxed and even enjoying herself because she'd forgotten what she was even mad about in the first place. The passage today from Hosea ends like that too, with the prophet calling Israel "Children of the Living God" and gathering all the people into a restored land. The book promises, in the end, a merciful love that is bigger than any transgression.

Any of us have had disappointments in our lives: desires that were dashed; betrayals that have left us empty; dreams that have crumbled under the harshness of reality. It can be tempting to harden ourselves, and to not risk love or trust; we convince ourselves to not have any hope in what can be. When we get to those places, we live through the lens of what we do not have, what we have not accomplished, and of where we do not belong. Individuals may find themselves in this isolated place; a whole country can also act from that place of disappointment and fear.

And here is where we need most to turn to Jesus' teaching. No matter how deep your disappointment; no matter how fierce your fears; no matter how consuming your need: God's love and grace are deeper; God's passion is fiercer; God satisfies the hungry heart more than any other bread if we only turn to God.

Jesus teaches us in prayer to dare to hope that God's kingdom be brought here on earth. With hopes like that, we are bound to be disappointed. And yet we keep praying these words faithfully. And by saying the words, we line up our lives and our action to fit into what God's realm might look like. They are revolutionary words that can change the world.

Jesus' teaching, "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you" often gets treated like a spiritual ATM. If I put in my prayer to God, then I will (ch-ching!) get the payout I hope to find. However, most of you who have seriously tried and tested this theory have probably found it does not quite work that way.

Jesus is telling us in his welcoming of tax collectors, outcasts and yes, also prostitutes that what will not be denied any child of God if she or he asks, searches, and knocks is this: the promise of God's abundant mercy and love. You do not have to deserve it. Even if the people who are supposed to love you have failed in loving you, God's love and mercy are available for those who ask, seek, and knock. In Jesus, we are shown a God who knows how just hard it is to be human, a God who longs for us just as Hosea longed for his wife. In this invitation to ask, seek and knock is also a possibility that we might be changed-- that all that makes us fearful and frustrated might be recreated into something hopeful and grace-filled. The door stands before you. The invitation awaits. Amen.