

Sermon - July 26, 2009

Hosea - How God Loves Us

This morning I hope you will make every effort to listen for God's word to you - and not for my sake but for yours - although an article I read raises my concern a little. It seems a young preacher - and he must have been young and foolish - was hoping to encourage better listening - and so he invited his congregation to turn in a brief written critique of his sermons - and he got them. He did have second thoughts when one Sunday he simply got this note - One schoolboy said to another - my teacher talks to herself during class. His friend said - so what - our preacher does that too, but he doesn't know it. - I don't know it - for sure - just fear it ... But now - This morning - God's word for us from Hosea... do listen.

Hosea - a love story - of sorts. God's love for God's people - God's people's love for God for awhile; Then the people's love was lost - but God's love sustained - and through challenging times God's love winning through again to God's people.

The power of love. On occasion I have heard these strange, but I suspect never truly meant or rightly said words - He was loved to death. I heard them a few times among all the overblown reaction to Michael Jackson's death. Michael Jackson - loved to death. I don't think so. Maybe pushed to extremes by his parents - by the media frenzy that pressured him at every turn. But loved to death? Much more likely - based on his behavior - he was starved for true love and never found it - or any real self-acceptance and contentment in life.

Loved to death? Can anyone be loved to death? Clinged to so closely it feels like death - yes. Idolized so intensely there is no time or space to find one's self, to be one's self. Yes. But then - with no true sense of self it's hard to know if you are being loved or used.

From our own experiences of those moments when we have felt least loved, even not loved at all, we know its hard to know when we are truly loved. But there are some rare moments, rare but there, thank God, moments when we know - heart true and soul deep - know that we are loved just as we are and just who we are - and that's not being loved to death - that's a forever love - that's being loved into life - eternal life.

That's how God loves you - And in the story of the prophet Hosea we can hear the story of God's love for us.

Let us pray...

O God, you know us, speak right to us now. Help us to hear your word for our lives - May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of these your faithful and loving people, be that word to us in Christ. Amen

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It was Israel - the northern kingdom of 'God's people. About 730 BC - 2700 years ago. A nation just about 200 years old - Politically and economically the nation had never been

stronger ... Religiously and morally it may never have been weaker. The rich were fabulously wealthy - while the poor grew in number and saw almost no hope or help from the rich, or sympathy or caring.

The nation that had been raised up in obedience to one God and to God's law was now a nation with no clear sense of right and wrong, and an uncountable variety of Gods and religions. And Hosea the prophet had a message for God's people...

Some one asked me about preaching from the prophets... Aren't there prophets today? And I had to think a minute before I said - No and yes. I said no - because God raised up prophets at a special time in history - and God deals with us now in different ways. But I said yes, because, the message of the prophets was both timely - and very timeless. The message rings true - as you heard - in our day - still.

Some one said - It is our task to separate the application to the prophet's time, from the truth, which abides for all time - and then pray how to apply it to our time.... You heard Hosea's words...

There is no faithfulness or kindness and no knowledge of God in the land; there is swearing, lying, killing, stealing and committing adultery; they break all bonds and murder follows murder.

I know it's a bit general - but also - too accurate for comfort. Health Care Reform so all may be served - and the richest balk at the small tax they will be asked to pay. Hosea talks about a sea with out fish - and ... and about land barren.... Environmental concerns. From 2700 years that's accuracy a bit disturbing.

But in Hosea - we see, we hear, also, something of the heart of our God. We see and hear almost the action of a new parent - who loves a child tenderly, guides the child carefully, tries to protect the child from temptation, to do dangerous or harmful things, warns the child, and then, finally, reluctantly, perhaps painfully punishes bad behavior.

And in it all - we see and hear - God's love for God's people in spite of themselves... in spite of our selves.

And the story is cast in the form of a bad marriage.... Between one faithful and one unfaithful spouse. Again - a timely word for our day perhaps - when marriage has lost almost all its biblical meaning. God calls upon Hosea to marry a woman of beauty and vitality - who is faithless.

Hosea's deep love for his wife Gomer is rejected. She takes other lovers, leaves the marriage, openly scorns and ridicules the love Hosea proclaims for her.

And all Hosea can do is watch as his beloved destroys her life.... Discovering the painful truth that the fickle god's of pleasure and excitement finally offer no comfort or peace.

And it is clear that Gomer is Israel - is a nation that has lost its way - and in Hosea we see and hear how all this is seen and felt and reacted to by God. And in the story - Hosea learns, and we can learn – the lessons of Love - of true love... God's love for us, and our love for God and others.

Hosea's message? Love does make the world go round. We need to be loved, and restlessly, endlessly, we seek to find love – love that will touch us, and excite us, and comfort us, and protect us, and – save us... save us from loneliness – and the loneliness of death.

This marriage metaphor of Hosea may be very hard to hear in this day of what some see as marriage's demise as an institution – or as any kind of guide to a standard of behavior in our society, or to an understanding of how we are loved and are to love.

We have re-defined marriage to mean anything almost anybody wants to say that it means to them - and at a particular moment people can change their minds about it at will... And so - there is no meaning to marriage at all. And - all of this - is in fact – not a denial of the importance of love and marriage in human life, but, in fact, a sad and even tragic affirmation of how desperately we need to know that we are loved.

In this story of Hosea and Gomer, God and God's people, there are, I think these lessons for our learning about how we are loved ... and how we best can know it... and show it.

I. The first great truth is that love – the love we need to live well - is not found out there... In someone or something else. It is in our true self- understanding... Hosea was sent by God to love a harlot – not on the basis of the love he would find from her, but on the basis of the love he had to give. He was called to love Gomer when she loved him and when she did not.

It is a lesson very hard to be learned in this day - when most of the connections between people are based on each of our own searches – sometimes desperate searches - to find happiness - to get for ourselves what we think we need.

We hope to get it from the someone else we are with... It is the sadness for me in the little pre-marriage and marriage counseling I do - I do less because there are less marriages, and most counseling now needs to focus much much more on each person than on the relationship they never were prepared to make.

Too often I see two people focused almost desperately on seeking to find the love they need from the other person - and that understanding leads to painful failure. Love is not out there. Love is God's gift of God's self to us.... In creation - In Christ.

I love the world out there - in all its wonder and beauty. But there is also out there a hardness and unloveliness – disease and disaster - disappointment and death. There are loving moments out there -- our love for our children - and our spouses – And good friends. And - in every case we can be, and we finally will be, disappointed when their lives move on. When we lose them – or closeness to them.

The little daughter who clung to her father's little finger with all her might - might now live in California and is seen, with her children, a few days a year ... Or the spouse of 60 years lost awhile to me in death. And things – how quickly they can be gone – or useless.

Love is not out there... And that's the second lesson... Love is an inside out kind of thing. And our ability to love is dependent on our understanding of how we are loved. Love is not desire, not passion, not even mutual affection, as good as these things are, but also as changeable as those things are, love is instead, the unrelenting, unending commitment to the good of the other, to the making happy, yes – the salvation of the other.

Hosea's story – when all the normal bases for love were destroyed - still Hosea loved Gomer. And God loved Israel and God loves us. God is love - creating, giving, forgiving love, love as Paul says that nothing in life or death can separate us from.

It is the heart of the 23rd. Psalm - The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want - and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

When we believe this, know it deep within us, understand that we are forever children of God and nothing – nothing - can separate us from God's love - then then we are freed and empowered and able to love others.

A strange wonderful little movement has begun in the treatment of kidney failure – modeled on the idea of pay it forward. Confident, secure about my own life, that nothing in life or death can separate me from the love of God I have seen in Jesus Christ, I can do a little bit of what God has done in Christ for me. I can give ... I can love as I have been loved.

And that's what a guy named – let's say Joe - did. He heard about the need of another person for a kidney transplant – and he offered one of his kidneys. But - he based his donation on the commitment of the person receiving the kidney to find someone to offer a kidney for transplant. And a minor movement has begun - a little wave of selflessness against the surge of selfishness - but – as we know in the history of our faith - the act of self-giving love can – does – change the world.

And that's God's call to us in the message of the minor prophet Hosea - Loved by God - we are called – sent – freed in life – to be lovers... to care for others – Not so they will care for us, but that they will care for themselves and for others.

It's what marriage is at its best, at its Christian beginning, was, and is still about - no matter the wildness of the world around us. It was – it is - the covenant – the promise – between a man and a woman to model in their lives the covenant and commitment God has made with creation - with us - to love us no matter what - and to share with us the power of the creation of new life.

And that's how God loves us. Provides us with all the goods that are needed for life, and the guidelines that can make all of our living less daunting and more the wonder and delight it can be ... and - Even the wisdom – if we'd use it - to love one another even as we've been loved.

And there is hope – that if we live in such love - if we continue to care and share for each other in this fellowship of Christ, if we continue to be willing to show love and care for the world around us and those who live in it....

Our own drumbeats of kindness goodness and love, will not be drowned out by all the noise of Nastiness around us... But will be light for others to see.... How does God love you? - You do see – don't you? In the dawn of every new day – No matter what the good or less than good of our living the day before... In the words of forgiveness from a cross - in the very emptiness of that cross - and so - in the promise that there will never not be a new day for you and for me ...

And – loved so much – how can we not – love one another. So faith hope and love abide - and the greatest of these is love ... Amen.

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