

"TOUGH LOVE"

Hosea 11:1-11

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York Center Church of the Brethren

Pastor Christy Waltersdorff

You may know by now that I love babies. And so do you. Bring a baby into this sanctuary and everyone smiles. Those who sit near the baby in worship don't hear a thing I say- they are too busy making faces at the baby. What is it about an infant that catches our attention? They are cute- that's for sure. But what is it about a baby or a toddler that makes us want to make eye contact and elicit a smile on those tiny lips? I know that not everyone goes gaga over babies—some people are a little freaked out by them. But that's probably for another sermon.

The very first baby/child dedication I did as the pastor here was for Jonah and Renee Neher in December of 1996. Renee was two and Jonah was about six months old. I doubt they remember that day- but I do. The most recent one was in May for Mira Wysong.

Every time I meet a new baby I ask them two questions- "Who are you?" and "Who will you become?" I don't usually get an answer- ok, I never get an answer- but I don't expect one. I ask because that is what I wonder every time I gaze into the face of a brand new human being. Right there- at the very beginning of their lives- the potential and the possibilities seem endless.

For over 42 years I have been pretty involved in the lives of my ten nieces and nephews. The oldest is 42 and the youngest just turned 18. I held them when they were tiny. When they get too big for their britches I like to remind them that I used to change their diapers. When I lived back east I spent a lot of time babysitting the older ones. Some days they made me laugh and other days they drove me up the wall.

One niece was about 8 when she ended up in the full bathtub wearing all of her clothes after she argued with me about taking her bath. One nephew told me, when he was about 5, that at church I was a good "speaker."

As I have watched those cherished babies grow into adults- some now with their own children- I have been at times, proud, sad, disappointed, and amazed at the choices they have made and the people they have become. I have dedicated, baptized, and married them. They are ten very different human beings- sometimes

it's hard to believe that we are all related. But they are good people with good hearts and that is what I have prayed for all these years. When I see them now, as adults, I remember back to their first days and all of the hopes and dreams we had for them.

So I am especially touched by our text for today from Hosea. This is quite a different picture than what we had last week when the prophet was told to marry a promiscuous woman who would never be faithful to him. Hosea lives his message unlike any other prophet. His personal life is a living parable about God's relationship with God's people. They were unfaithful to God so the prophet married an unfaithful woman. Now we find the metaphor extended to parent and child.

Some of these verses are so tender and intimate. "When Israel was a child, I loved him." (In the scripture, when it says, Ephraim, that is another way of saying the people of Israel.) "It was I who taught him to walk. I took her up in my arms. I lifted him to my cheek. I bent down to feed her." And then the words of God sound perplexed. "I cared for these people like a mother cares for her child. I protected them. I fed them. I loved them. And still they turn away from me?" Familiar words to most parents, I think.

Do you remember the names Hosea was told to give his children? The oldest son was Jezreel, which was a reminder of the place of a massacre and great violence. The daughter was named, "No Mercy." And the youngest son was called, "Not My People." Gee, I wonder why these kids rebelled as teenagers.

Generations earlier God had liberated the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt and led them into freedom. During that time God took them by the hand, fed them, taught them, and kept them safe. For a while that was enough for them.

But before too long they were melting down their gold to make a calf to worship.

And so began a very familiar cycle. The people misbehaved. God got mad. They said they were sorry. God forgave them. The people misbehaved. God got mad. They said they were sorry. God forgave them. The people misbehaved.... You get the picture.

At the time of Hosea the people of the northern nation of Israel were inching ever closer to annihilation by their powerful Assyrian enemy. It is a time of social, political, and religious disintegration. And to make matters worse, instead of turning to their God for help, the people are turning to the idols of the religion of Baal. Once again the covenant relationship is broken and the promises of the people to remain loyal to God are shattered. This is the oldest story in the Bible- God creates us, delivers us, saves us, cares for us, loves us. But we turn away, searching for a

cheap imitation of the real thing. The most amazing part of the story is that God doesn't give up. This could be the sign of a very unhealthy, codependent relationship- but where God is concerned it is really amazing grace.

We often refer to the "angry" God of the Old Testament but that is not what we see here. This is one of the most poignant, tender, intimate texts in the whole Bible. Hosea shows us the God who bends over and picks us up, holds our hands, feeds us, loves us. Why in the world would we walk away from this God? from this divine Parent? I know there are many bewildered human parents who ask the same questions. *"I have always taken care of you. I have always been there for you. Why would you turn your back on me?"*

In the book of Hosea we read a pretty damning list of accusations against the people. This is what the prophet says:

No one is faithful. No one loves. The priests and the prophets are sinners and liars. The people are addicted to idols. The rulers are corrupt oppressors. They wouldn't recognize God if they tripped over God.

Hosea says their faithfulness lasts as long as the morning dew. He says it is so bad that the vultures are circling. He claims that the people took to sin like a pig to mud. He says they plowed wicked ways, reaped a crop of evil and ate a salad of lies.

God threatens to allow their enemy to overtake them. And says, "I will send you back to Egypt- back into slavery." And who could blame God? But then we see God's tender side again. From THE MESSAGE: *"My people are hell-bent on leaving me. They pray to god Baal for help. He doesn't lift a finger to help them. But how can I give up on you, Ephraim? How can I turn you loose, Israel? How can I leave you to be ruined? I can't bear to even think such thoughts. My insides churn in protest."*

And why isn't God giving them what they deserve? Because God is God- not human, but holy. In this unusual portrait we see the agony of God; the suffering heart of God. We see the God who turns, not to punishment and retribution, but to compassion and mercy. According to the Jewish laws in Deuteronomy rebellious sons are to be stoned to death. For the sake of mercy God defies God's own laws.

This God is merciful and compassionate but that doesn't mean God isn't also fearsome and dangerous. How will God call the wayward children back home? With a roar like a lion. I was at a zoo one time when suddenly the lion roared. There was no preparation for it and it could be heard all over the zoo. Every human and every animal stopped in their tracks at that sound. It rumbled into my heart- I could almost feel it. It was majestic and thrilling but also a tiny bit scary. I knew the lion

was not a danger to me- but for an instant- I wondered if he was still in his enclosure. I think every other animal in the zoo was looking for its escape route.

That is how God will call us back- and the *"trembling children will come running from the ends of the earth."* And God will return them to their homes.

Have you read the C.S. Lewis book, THE LION, THE WITCH, AND THE WARDROBE? This powerful children's book, tells of the adventures of four siblings in the magical place called Narnia. The story is fun, but it's also an allegory of Christ and salvation, with Christ represented by the lion Aslan.

When in Narnia, the children meet Mr. and Mrs. Beaver, who describe the mighty lion to them.

"Is he a man?" asked Lucy.

"Aslan a man!" said Mr. Beaver sternly. "Certainly not. I tell you he is King of the wood and the son of the great emperor-beyond-the-sea. Don't you know who is the King of the Beasts? Aslan is a lion - *the Lion, the great lion.*"

"Ooh!" said Susan, "I'd thought he was a man. Is he - quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."

"That you will, dearie, and no mistake" said Mrs. Beaver; "If there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly."

"Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy.

"Safe?" said Mr. Beaver; "Don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

Anna Case-Winters writes, "God's wrath is the fire of God's love, ordered toward restoration, not destruction. The passage ends with a hopeful word. Waywardness and its consequences do not have the last word. God's intentions are still redemption, restoration, return. The ones who have turned away, become disoriented, and wandered away from home are not left to their own devices. They are called home, like lion cubs responding to the summons of the parent. The wayward children are still beloved children of a God who bends down and lifts them up."

This **isn't** the story of the Prodigal Son who comes to his senses and rushes home into the arms of his faithful Dad. This is the story of the Faithful Parent who- in

anguish, heartbreak, and the fiercest love- comes seeking out the children who have strayed.

Hosea's book ends with these words, from chapter 14:

"O Israel, come back! Return to your God! You're down but you're not out. Prepare your confession and come back to God.

Pray to God: 'Take away our sin, accept our confession. Receive as restitution our repentant prayers. Assyria won't save us; horses won't get us where we want to go.

We'll never again say 'our god' to something we've made up. You're our last hope. Is it not true that in you the orphan finds mercy?'

God speaks: "I will heal their waywardness. I will love them lavishly. My anger is played out. I will make a fresh start with Israel. They will burst into bloom like a crocus in the spring. They'll put down deep oak tree roots, they'll become a forest of oaks!

They'll become splendid- like a giant sequoia, fragrant like a grove of cedars!

Those who live near them will be blessed by them, be blessed and prosper like golden grain. Everyone will be talking about them, spreading their fame as the vintage children of God.

Israel is finished with gods that are no-gods. From now on I am the one who answers and satisfies them. I am like a luxuriant fruit tree. Everything you need it to be found in me." (Hosea 14:1-8, THE MESSAGE)

May it be so.

Amen.