

# Keep Choosing Love

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, 4 August 2019.

Hosea 11:1-11; Psalm 107:1-9, 43; Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-21.

We get two options for Old Testament readings in the season after Pentecost. One follows an extended story – this year it is the Prophets. The other varies from week to week to reinforce the gospel lesson.

We've been following the continuous story this year. So we've heard about Elijah, Elisha, Amos, and now Hosea.

But last week, I was tempted to switch plans. I thought it might be wise to avoid last Sunday's Old Testament reading. You may remember. It was the introduction to Hosea. "Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord."

That's not a word we say often in worship. I knew it would raise some eyebrows.

But I decided to keep it to set the stage for this week's lesson from Hosea, one of the most beautiful descriptions of the love of God in the whole Bible.

"When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son."

The Book of Hosea is complicated, let's just say. Troubling, even. God told Hosea to marry a woman who would not be faithful to him and use his marriage to illustrate the people's unfaithfulness to God. Over the centuries, interpreters concocted salacious backstories about Gomer, Hosea's wife. Some said she was a temple prostitute who engaged in Canaanite fertility rituals. Others said she was a temptress of some sort. But there's no evidence for either. Gomer may have fallen in love with someone else. She may have been a victim of human trafficking. We don't know.

We don't know in part because Gomer has no say throughout the story, even though the book is largely about her. At one point, Hosea gets angry and tells the kids to go tell their mother that he is going to harm her, which we'd call domestic abuse today. That is bad enough as a family drama, but the text says this sad family story is a stand-in for the people's relationship with God. Yes, God was in covenant with an unfaithful people, so that may be a fair comparison. But the text also seems to suggest God is like an abusive spouse who gets mad at being rejected and takes it out on the kids. Which is pretty horrible if you think about it.

And then there are the children. In the lesson last Sunday, God told Hosea to give his children awful names. The first was Jezreel, which was the site of a tragic defeat. Like naming a child 9/11. God told Hosea to name the next one Lo-ruhamah, which means not pitied, because God was so mad God would no longer have pity on the people. The final one was named Lo-ammi, which means not my child.

What kind of parent would do this? What kind of God would tell a parent to do this?

As I said, Hosea is complicated. Hosea is like a lot of writings in the Bible that say disturbing things about God and about people. The Bible is the story of the relationship between God and humanity as it unfolded in the people of Israel. As they told their story, the Biblical writers appear to have tried to read God's mind. They imagined what God must have been thinking and put it in human terms. If we take passages like these literally,

we end up using the Bible to defend bad treatment of women, male superiority in the home, an angry view of God, and all kinds of things we know aren't right.

But even if we don't take these passages literally, we can still get the wrong idea. These human-like depictions of God in the Old Testament have led to confusion about the nature of God in general. There's an idea out there that says that God was originally mean and harsh. And then Jesus came and died made God nice again. So just ignore the Old Testament God because the New Testament God is the good one. I'm sure you've heard someone say something like that.

But that's not what the scriptures are trying to say. No, God is the same, the Alpha and the Omega. God is good all the time. From the beginning to forever. Over and over again both the Old and New Testaments reveal a God who keeps being hurt by humanity and keeps loving humanity matter what.

And Hosea, in spite of being so complicated, is a good example.

After describing God as a wounded spouse, Hosea then presented God as a worried parent. God had showered love and wisdom and favor on the people of Israel. God called them out of misery in Egypt to be a light to the nations. They were to show the world what it looks like when we treat people right and take care of everyone. But instead they rebelled and decided to be like other nations. Soon their world looked a lot like Egypt, with a few rich and powerful people on top and everyone else suffering below. Like any parent worried for a child, God grieved their choices because God knew it would lead to destruction.

And of course, that's what happened. Hosea was one of few prophets writing from the Northern Kingdom of Israel, the one that got wiped out by Assyria and became the "Lost Tribes of Israel." Hosea could see the handwriting on the wall. Like any parent in that situation God was furious and heartbroken and started muttering threats.

But then, God remembered.

*When Israel was a child, I loved him,  
and out of Egypt I called my son.*

*It was I who taught Ephraim (one of the tribes of Israel) to walk,*

*I led them with cords of human kindness,  
with bands of love.*

*In the midst of the people's betrayal, God remembered love. God remembered how much God loved this  
exasperating, foolish, destructive people.*

*How can I give you up, Ephraim?  
How can I hand you over, O Israel?*

*I am God and no mortal,  
the Holy One in your midst,  
and I will not come in wrath.*

This is the witness of the scriptures. I am God and no mortal. People hold on to resentments and seek vengeance and violate the covenant and reap the whirlwind. People tend to assume God is like us. The biblical writers sometimes imagined God in the same terms.

But still the voice of love rang out across the centuries. "I am God and no mortal. I will not come in wrath." Every single time, when confronted with the worst in humanity, God always chose love. God thought about it and weighed the options and then loved intentionally. Yes, this happened at the cross. But also in the Garden of Eden and after Noah's flood and in the wilderness and with King David and through the prophets. God chose to keep loving no matter what. The nature of God is revealed in this intentional choice to love.

And we are made in God's image. We have the divine ability to choose love. Even when people disappoint us, even when we wonder if we will ever make a difference. We are most like God when we keep choosing love.

I want to lift up a powerful example of this kind of love in our midst. About six years ago, Greg and Lisa Herring started playing pick up soccer games with kids at Boxwood recreation center in East Carver Heights. Just a few kids joined in at first. Neighbors wondered who in the world they were and figured pretty soon that crazy couple would give up and go home. But Greg and Lisa kept showing up. Pretty soon there were enough kids to form a couple of teams. St. Thomas started paying for fees and uniforms. Greg and Lisa wanted to do more, so Lisa started a Path to Shine mentoring program at Boxwood. Path to Shine mentors realized it would be helpful to be able to talk with the teachers of the children. Most of the children went to Brewer Elementary. We approached Brewer about becoming a Partner in Education, and Margo Easterbrook agreed to coordinate that partnership. The neighborhood is a food desert, so Lisa worked with families to organize a Friends and Neighbors Network that brings a two-week supply of healthy food from the food bank to the neighborhood every other week. This relationship keeps growing in beautiful ways.

But it could have fallen apart at the beginning. Early on, the kids were not easy to deal with. They're still not sometimes, but early on it was harder. Some kids in the neighborhood tried to cause trouble. Adults in the neighborhood were suspicious and wouldn't help. During those early days there wasn't a lot of trust. But Greg and Lisa and Margo and others just kept showing up. They kept turning to love and invited lots of you to join them. It's one of the most God-like things happening among us, and we are all grateful.

School starts again this week, so these programs are getting started again. This is one of many opportunities at St. Thomas to turn toward love. Tutoring at Brewer is at 8:30 on Wednesdays. Maybe you can do that on your way to work. If afternoon is better, Path to Shine meets on Monday afternoons. If you know anything at all about soccer, maybe you can help coach. If you don't know anything about soccer, people are needed to monitor bathroom and water breaks during practices on Monday, Tuesday, and Friday. Maybe you can come to the games on Saturdays beginning in September to get to know the parents and the kids. Maybe you can't be part of these particular ministries, but there are other ways you can serve and love.

Choose to be like God. Choose love.

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Grace Burton-Edwards  
St. Thomas Episcopal Church  
Columbus, GA 31906

