

God's Unending Compassion

Hosea 11:1-9

Today, we have heard a prophetic text from the Hebrew scriptures. I want to start with giving all of us some background into the role of prophets in the Bible.

Prophets in the Hebrew Bible often have four different titles and they are used in different circumstances. One would be Seer, Diviner, Person of God, and Prophet. A Seer is someone who reports and receives visions; a Diviner is someone who is able to communicate with the world and the Sacred; a Person of God is a person who is considered to be holy; and finally, a Prophet is someone who is called to a certain task. Basically, a prophet is someone who sees and understands things that others do not. So Hosea is considered to be part of the Book of Twelve. Twelve prophets, which is symbolically significant because it mirrors the twelve tribes of Israel. The Book of Twelve is also sometimes referred to as the "minor prophets". Minor in the sense that they are shorter and not as long as the major prophets, who we know to be Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

A couple weeks ago, you may remember that we spoke about the scripture from 1 Kings, which is about the kingdom of Israel being divided. Divided into the north, where ten of the twelve tribes ended up, and then the south, where the other two ended. This happened because of the choice of the new king, who ignored the request from the people to lighten their load. This king chose not to become a servant leader, as was advised by the elders of his father. Instead, he chose desire for power and the leadership of what we would know as a tyrant. Hosea happened to be a prophet from the north kingdom, which was the group of people who had asked Rehoboam to change his mind and not become a tyrant. Hosea was in a time in the north which was very troubled. And in the final years where Israel finally succumbed to the Assyrians, during Hosea's time, many of the kings were assassinated.

But he continued to prophesize. He continued to share the news of God. And despite the people's faithfulness, he truly believed and his message was that God still loved the people. Hosea proclaimed that God did not want to punish them, but because the people continued to worship other gods, God had no real choice left. Something had to be done. Hosea truly believed that God was struggling during this time. He believed that God was struggling to hold back the tears as a parent would watching one's children doing things that they know they shouldn't. Wished they wouldn't. Hosea speaks of God as broken-hearted. God as a parent, sees that children need to be

punished, but uses punishment more as an opportunity to learn and grow, rather than being destructive.

In the passage today from Hosea, we are told that God is committed to the people, that God loves the people, and then cries out: “How can I give up on you, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? My heart recoils within me. My compassion grows warm and tender. For I am God and not human, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come to destroy.” God proclaims that, “I led them with cords of compassion and with bands of love. I bent down to them and fed them.” God is asking, “Why do you turn away from me?”

As people of faith, when have we turned away from God? If we were to just take a moment to think: when have people of faith turned away from God? When have you walked away from God? When have you walked away thinking that you knew better? That you had a better path to walk? That you knew the right way? Can you think of any personal examples of times when you walked away from God?

Hosea, like many of the prophets, has a message which is an expression of hope. Hope that we can be reconciled. Hope that restoration for the people can and will happen. Hosea’s message is truly an expression of hope. There is hope for all people. There is hope when people recognize their wrongdoing and turn back to God. For God will show them compassion. God will love them.

The message holds true for us today as well: when we recognize our own wrongdoing and turn back to God, God will welcome us with open arms. God will show us compassion. And God shows us unconditional love. God in the Hebrew scriptures of the Old Testament is often seen as a vengeful, angry, and punishing God...but not according to Hosea.

Hosea’s message today brought to mind a beautiful African accountability practice that I want to share with you. In some villages in Africa, when a person does something harmful surrounded by all of the other villagers for two whole days. During that time, the people tell the person who had done something wrong all the *good* things that they have done. The belief is that each human being comes into the world as good. But in our desire for safety, love, peace, and happiness, we sometimes make mistakes. We head down a path that can hurt and harm others. These mistakes, according to the village, would be seen as a cry for help. And it’s up the community to help that person be reunited with their true self. With their true nature.

This is quite different from the experience we have in our world right now. Where often when someone has done something wrong, we spend more time condemning them and reminding them of the things that they have done wrong, rather than focusing on who they truly are at their core.

Walter Brugerma, who is a respected Biblical scholar, has written many books on the prophets, and he is quoted as saying this:

“The prophetic tasks of the church are to tell the truth in a society that lives in illusion, to grieve in a society that denial, and express hope in a society that lives in despair.”

Hosea did this for the people in the northern kingdom. As a community of faith in this place and time, how do the words of Hosea speak to us? I feel that God is calling us as a community of faith to name that society obsessed with success and individualism, led by greed and power plays. None of which bring the happiness that we seek. Being right is not what brings us a sense of value and meaning in our lives. It will not fulfill our deepest longings, nor will it fill our greatest need.

As a community of faith, we grieve the loss of innocent lives caused by war and religious righteousness at the expense of other. God does not expect us to be perfect and right. God requires us to be compassionate, forgiving and loving. As a community of faith, we are offering hope. Hope for a different way, where people are valued, not discarded. Where we share our abundance with others. Where our focus is to serve one another, rather than to take what we believe is rightfully ours. The National United Church today is calling on all of us to join in the call for a ceasefire in the Middle East. We are being called to put aside our differences and judgements and demand peace as a whole world. We turn to God in this time. This is the time when we turn to God for strength, for courage, for seeking peace for this world. Like Hosea, I feel that God is calling us to let go of this culture of perfectionism. To acknowledge our cultural privilege. And commit ourselves to instead becoming a community that helps each other. Helps each of us become the best versions of ourselves while choosing to serve this world, bringing equity and peace. Now is the time to gather as a community in both small groups and large groups and to practice accountability – but *affirming* accountability. Where we see the good in each other. We need to spend time giving thanks for all the good things we see in each person. Seeing the God qualities in every single person in our midst.

So let us focus our attention on coming together in a circle of love, rather than clamouring upon one another to get to the top. Let us hold one another accountable, but in order to do that, we need to know each other. And so, I hope you will take the time to ask the deep questions of one another. I bet the person that you probably sat beside in this sanctuary many times – you probably have no idea how God has changed their lives. So ask them. When have you felt closest to God and why? What do you want to do to make a difference in this world? What brings you joy? When was a time that you turned away from God, and what brought you back?

The promise that Hosea gives us today is that no matter what, God is there for us. Ready to help us, change us and transform us. We can trust that God will always be watching us, believing in us and loving us. Even when we make mistakes, and especially when we turn away from God. So have hope. Be a prophetic voice in this world that is counter-cultural to what we see and live on a daily basis. And let us love one another. Amen.