

## A Different Way to Look at God the Father

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First Presbyterian Church, Newton  
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Hosea 11: 1-11

Hosea is an interesting prophet. He is a contemporary of Isaiah, Micah, and Amos, which is to say, the Eighth Century before Jesus. God told him to do this, so he took a wife from the local brothel, to symbolize Israel's unfaithfulness to her husband, God the Lord.

She has children, to whom Hosea gives strange names which symbolize again Israel's broken relationship with God. The first child is a son, Jezreel, which refers to the place where Jehu's coup d'état happened. God will punish his dynasty. The second is a daughter, named "Lo-ruhamah" which means Not Pitied. God will no longer have any pity on the House of Israel. Finally, she had another son, who is named Lo-ammi, which means Not Mine. You are not my people and I am not your God!

He prophesies much as his contemporaries, Micah, Amos, Isaiah. Amos in particular begins by offering these oracles against all of Judah's neighbors. One by one he condemns them, and the listeners are all but cheering! Yeah, you tell 'em, Amos! Then Amos turns and does the same thing to Israel and Judah! Hosea does much the same, focusing on Israel's unfaithfulness; like Hosea's unfaithful wife, Israel has been out there consorting with the Baals, unfaithful.

Then comes chapter eleven, which we read today.

First of all, Hosea quotes God as saying, "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son." We see here the tenderness of the Father. The Father cannot bear to see the son going astray. The Father cannot bear the punishment that the child will cause, and will receive.

God threatens Israel with punishment, but then relents; how can I do this? We read here the agony of God, the uncertainty, even indecisiveness of the Father faced with his recalcitrant child. What should I do with this child?

If you have ever had a child who needed help, you know this story all too well. You have never heard the story of our son, and I am not going to tell it now, but let me say that this is a familiar feeling. You do what you know is best, yet your heart breaks all the way along. How can I do this?

Finally, God says, "I can't do this. I will not execute my fierce anger." Here we see that God's mercy triumphs even over God's own justice. I taught him to walk — how can I turn away from him?

This is a kind of turning point in the Old Testament. We often hear it said that the God of the Old Testament is angry and vengeful, but the God of the New Testament is loving and merciful. Some take this so far that they veer off into heresy, thinking that the Father is not the God of the Old Testament. What we see is that the understanding of God begins to expand and change with Hosea; it doesn't ripen completely until Jesus comes, but the change is there. God is infinitely merciful, and refuses to condemn his children when go running after other gods, just as we always take our children back when they run away.

I am not saying that God isn't just, or that God doesn't really care what we do. God is holy and wants us to be holy as well. It's just that, at the end, finally, God's mercy and love prevail.

The Hebrew of this chapter is notoriously difficult; it just isn't all that clear at points. I remember my first Presbytery meeting; I had come to be enrolled as a candidate. I sat through the examination of a retired pastor who mostly just grinned and quoted the Apostles' Creed. Then a young black man who was a theological student came forward. He did his best to answer the questions in his own words, and I thought he was doing pretty well, though the presbyters clearly didn't like it. Then the leaders mentioned that this fellow had written the best explanation of Hosea 11 that they had ever read! He really knew his Hebrew! The Presbytery passed him and good for them! Mercy and love prevail, even in presbytery meetings.

This chapter paints a very appealing picture of God, as a loving Father who cares so much for his children, even when they run after other gods. But we all know there are parents out there who treat children badly. Some children are beaten, and worse. Abusive parents need to be called out and separated from their children. Some children want to be out of the house and away — for their own reasons. I understand that families are different, and that not all families are perfect; I submit to you that no family is perfect. We all have our own “screwed-upness” as one pastor used to say. And we do. But there are some parents who are just over the line.

I met a woman once whose father had been terribly abusive; she could barely sit still in worship when we mentioned God as “heavenly Father.” I tried to tell her that God is the model by which we judge our earthly fathers, not the other way around. It didn't do any good.

Let's talk honestly for a moment. What about your idea of God? Your picture of God? Is God a cruel, even vindictive God who punishes us for every misdeed? Do you think of God as one to be frightened of? Are you scared of God?

Remember the Wizard of Oz, the movie? When they finally get to see the great wizard, he is just this face hanging above them, in the smoke and fire, Oz the Great and Terrible! Remember that? They are all so scared they can barely talk. The Cowardly Lion runs out of the hall and jumps out a window! Well, many times it may be that we think of that when we think of God the Father. God, the Great and Terrible.

But then they discover that this is all a show. There is a man behind the curtain who is, in his words, “a very good man but a very bad wizard.”

God is often conceived as some kind of wizard. He is unchangeable; his decrees are permanent; his justice is so holy that he turns away in disgust from any sin; his power is Almighty and infinite. Yes, that is how we think of God at times. As though he were the deity in some ancient Greek text.

Walter Brueggemann has taught us that if we would understand God, we have to read the verbs. Pay attention to the verbs, he said over and over. “How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? My heart recoils within me...”. What we have here is a God who feels things, who can change his mind, who can turn back to Israel even when Israel wants to run away. This is not the static god of the Greeks, but the active feeling God of Hebrew piety.

It’s almost as though God were walking along with us in this life, seeking to help us and lead us, discovering with us the things that enchant us, and calling us to turn from the pretty things that attract our attention but distract us from him.

Hosea makes it clear as we read that Israel’s problem is idolatry; they are always looking for gods they can see, worshiping them rather than the true God. The contemporary church has a problem with that as well. Some churches are into nationalism; others swear allegiance to people like Vladimir Putin. There are troubles everywhere you go!

Hosea seeks to call us to faithfulness, so that may follow God truly. So many things in the scripture have a kind of political slant to them, against the power of the empire, against Rome. We have domesticated them to the point where people don’t believe that any more. But if we look carefully we can see it. Even here Hosea warns that Israel will “return to Egypt” and the sword will rage in the cities.

But even so, God will also not give the people up completely to the enemy. God will be there for them at the end. God’s mercy will prevail.

I think what this means for us is that we can’t give up on anyone. They may seem hopeless, addicted to drugs or whatever, or endlessly mean and grumpy, or just cantankerous. Yet God’s love and God’s mercy will prevail, and they too will be gathered into God’s presence.

We may be tempted to give up, but we shouldn’t. We should hold out for people just as God does, giving them the benefit of the doubt and the chance to turn back to God. For us today this means seeing every person as a child of God whom God loves, and hoping with God that the Spirit can turn each of them to Jesus. If we can do that, if we can learn to react to people in that way, rather than as threats or potential enemies, we will get along so much better with all the people we encounter.

So, worship God the Father, and remember always that, despite some of the rhetoric you may have been taught, or that has been popular in Christian history, God is actually so very merciful, endlessly so, and will never turn you away, no matter what!

That is Hosea's message to us.

Thanks be to God! Amen.