

“A Special Kind of Love” Hosea 11:1-11

There was not and probably still is not much for a teenager to do on the weekend in Spruce Pine, North Carolina where I grew up. So occasionally, whenever my friends and I were bored on a Friday night, we would drive an hour southwest on Highway 19 to the big city of Asheville, the land of malls, movie theaters, and miniature golf.

My parents trusted my friends and me to stay out of trouble on those trips. And there were only two rules that I was expected to follow.

Rule Number One: I had to be home by 11:00 p.m.

And Number Two: If the car broke down or we were in an accident or the traffic was heavy, if something happened and I knew that I was going to be late, I was supposed to call them right away and let them know.

One night, my friend John and I had just gotten out of a movie in Asheville when we decided to head across town to a video game arcade. We weren't sure of its exact location since it was in an unfamiliar part of town so it took us longer than expected to get there.

And once we arrived, we became so interested in zapping space aliens and talking to the girl working behind the counter at the snack bar that we completely lost track of time.

Finally, we looked at the clock and realized that we might just have enough time to make it home by eleven. And John claimed that he knew a shortcut back to the highway.

However, that “shortcut” took us almost halfway to Cherokee and the Georgia state line. We knew we were lost and it took us quite a while to get turned around and back on track. And it never crossed my mind that we should stop at a pay phone and call home.

When John finally dropped me off at my house, it was about 2:00 a.m. The lights were still on, which meant that my parents were still awake. Wide awake. And I knew that I was in for it.

My mother started. “*Just where have you been?*” she asked.

Then, my dad joined in. “*What was it you were supposed to do?*” he wondered out loud. “*Could you not do what we asked you to do? Just one simple thing. Just take a minute to call. That's all we ask.*”

The look on their faces told me that I had disappointed them. *“Son,”* they said, *“sometimes, when you do stuff like this, we just feel so ...”*

And then, both my parents wrapped their arms around me in one of the biggest bear hugs I had ever received. And then, I noticed that their eyes were a little red, almost as if they had been crying.

Is there anything quite as powerful or as painful as the love that parents have for their children? Having been on both sides of that relationship now, both as a child and as a parent, I don't think that there is.

And so, is it any wonder that the prophet Hosea used that special kind of love as a metaphor for the love that God has for his people?

So many Christians have the false impression that the God of the Old Testament and especially the God spoken of by the prophets is only an angry and unforgiving God of judgment.

But I would argue that Hosea provides us with one of the warmest and most tender images of God in all of scripture, the image of God as a loving parent.

God is like a father who takes his little boy by the hand and leads him as they walk together.

God is like a mother who lifts her baby into her arms and rocks her to sleep.

God is like a parent who stoops down and coaxes the child to open wide and eat a spoonful of cereal.

Israel was God's adopted child. God had chosen them out of all the peoples of the earth. When they were delivered from slavery in Egypt, as they wandered forty years in the wilderness, they had been like a toddler who was just beginning to take his first steps.

And God had been like a parent to them picking them up whenever they stumbled and fell. It was God who put them back on their feet just as a parent steadies the wobbly legs of a child just learning to walk.

And like a parent, God did this not because they deserved it or had earned it, but solely out of love.

This is our God, a Heavenly Parent who is kind and affectionate toward his children.

The trouble, though, is that God's children, like most children, have something of a rebellious streak. The Lord asks that we love him and obey him. Yet so often we fall short of his holy expectations. We frequently forget our duties and responsibilities to God just as easily as I forgot my curfew so many years ago on that trip to Asheville.

We reject worship and prayer. We turn away from neighbors in need. We hold tightly to the gifts God gives to us refusing to share them with one another as he has asked.

We place our trust in money and missiles or in our own strength and intelligence to make us happy and secure rather than in the power and goodness of God.

God's people today are no different from God's people back then. Like Israel, we abandon God and follow after idols of our own making. Like most children, as soon as we have learned to walk, it isn't long before we run off on our own and start getting into all sorts of trouble.

When God adopted Israel and when God adopted all of us in the church, he adopted a family full of disobedient children. The truth is that we all sin. And our sin cannot help but disappoint God.

There is a sense of frustration here in this passage and maybe even a hint of anger. A child's misbehavior can make a parent feel like screaming and yelling and grabbing the kid by the shirt collar and shaking him.

Likewise, Israel's sin aggravated God to the point where he considered treating them like the people of Admah and Zeboiim, two cities that had been completely destroyed alongside Sodom and Gomorrah. The children of God had irritated their Heavenly Parent so much that God was on the verge of giving them up.

There is a sense of heartbreak here as well, the kind of heartbreak that any parent who has ever watched a child go astray would recognize. Sadness and sorrow are the price parents sometimes pay for loving a child.

Children can bring suffering upon themselves. And when that happens, the parents of those children suffer right along with them.

When I looked into my parents' teary eyes on that very late Friday night that had become a much too early Saturday morning, I had a glimpse of how much love could hurt. What I had done wounded them. What I had not done concerned them. And so they wept.

It seems that the God described here in Hosea is also a parent who weeps over the disobedience of his children. This is a God who mourns whenever his children turn away from him.

The sin of Israel would have terrible consequences as sin always does. Their nation would be captured by the Assyrians and many would be forced to leave their homes becoming exiles in a foreign land.

But perhaps, the most tragic consequence of their sin was the fact that it had grieved God so deeply. Some like to imagine that God is so high above us that he is far beyond all suffering and pain. Surely, nothing we can do is able to hurt God.

And yet, the testimony of Hosea is that when our Heavenly Parent looks upon the sin of his children, when God looks upon our sin, it tears God up inside.

But despite the fact that we drive God crazy, despite the fact that we frustrate God so much, despite the fact that we cause God so much heartache, God never stops loving us. Our Heavenly Parent refuses to give up on children like you and me.

God looks at our sin and feels compassion for us. God responds not with hatred or wrath, but with warmth and tenderness. Even though people often let go of God, God never lets go of anyone.

There is nothing that can cut those cords of human kindness. There is no sin that can destroy those bands of love.

God refuses to give us what we deserve. Instead, God gives us what we need.

What we may deserve is wrath and fury and anger. Because of some of the things we do, the ways we hurt each other, the ways we hurt ourselves, God is justified in being angry with us.

Nevertheless, God always offers us love and mercy. God is like the father who never lets his frustration with his children stop him from loving them. God is like the mother who continues to deal tenderly with her kids even when they have greatly disappointed her.

Someone once shared the story¹ of an elderly lady who was interviewed on a television news program. As it turned out, the woman had been a single mother and had raised a very large family.

Life and parenting had not always been easy for her. There had been plenty of frustration, disappointments, and heartbreak. Yet in spite of it all, she had persevered and every single one of her children had been a strong student at school. And all of them had become highly successful in their chosen professions.

A reporter asked this woman if she had any secret to reveal about raising children. *“I suppose you loved all your children equally,”* he asked her. *“You made sure that they all got the same treatment, right?”*

She looked at him and said, *“Yes, I loved them. I loved them all, each one of them. But not equally. No. I loved the one the most that was down until he was up. I loved the one the most that was weak until she was strong. I loved the one the most that was hurt until he was healed. I loved the one the most that was lost until she was found.”*

Friends, is that not a very special kind of love? This is not a love that loves only those who love in return. This is not a love that only loves those who are lovable. This is not a love that loves those who ask to be loved.

Friends, what she described is something like the love of God. The God of Hosea is a God who would go to any lengths to bring his wayward children home to him.

When our sin throws us down, God seeks to lift us up. When our faith is weak, God’s love remains strong. When we lose our way, God is always there to find us.

That is the very special kind of love that God has for God’s children. It is a love that goes far beyond what we deserve. It is a love that perseveres no matter how badly we may behave. It is a love that calls us home to the table and welcomes us with open arms no matter what we’ve done or what we’ve been or how long we’ve been away.

And it is a love that loves us even when we do not love in return. It is a love that loves us even when we turn our back on it. It is a love that has compassion for us when we sin and bring suffering on ourselves.

That is the good news of the prophet Hosea. God is like a loving, caring parent.

¹ https://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/illustration_search.asp?keywords=bill+ritter&imageField2=

We frustrate God when we do not listen. We disappoint God when we do not obey. We break God's heart when we fail to love him in return.

But God always chooses to love us, with a love that triumphs over wrath and anguish, with a love that never lets us go, with a very, very special kind of love indeed.

Thanks be to God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.