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Hosea 11:1-11

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Cords of Human Kindness

Hosea was the first of the twelve Minor Prophets in the Hebrew Bible. They are called minor not because they were less significant than the Major Prophets, but simply because the books they wrote were shorter. In order to understand this beautiful passage from the eleventh chapter of Hosea's book, I think it's helpful to know a little about Hosea himself.

He was prophesying at a time of great turmoil. The Northern Kingdom (Israel, also called Ephraim by Hosea) had just split from the Southern Kingdom (Judah) and the neighboring nations of Egypt and Assyria were taking advantage of the chaos and seeking to subsume them to their will and their gods.

Aside from the political climate, Hosea's personal life was a shambles as well. Hosea was married to Gomer and she has been called an adulteress, a whore and a prostitute. Fredrick Buechner is more generous and describes her as, "always good company—a little heavy with the lipstick maybe, a little less than choosy about men and booze, a little loud, but great at a party and always good for a laugh." (*Peculiar Treasures*. 47) Whatever term you choose for her, the message is clear: she was a party girl and a flirt who was prone to temptations of various sorts. In the end or in the beginning, she was unfaithful to Hosea. There has been quite a lot of ink spilled by scholars who have tried to discern whether she was promiscuous before she married Hosea or afterward. The general feeling is that she was clearly the unfaithful sort before they were married; she didn't just change her stripes once she found herself married to a man whose job it was to proclaim gloom and destruction. Maybe she even thought he would save her from herself.

Why, you might well ask, did Hosea marry her? I don't have a neat answer to this. My best guess is that he loved her; maybe a tiny part of him thought she would actually save him from his serious self. Let's step back and think about what it feels like, if we can bear it, to love someone who is not faithful, someone who leaves you for another and,

if you happen to be married to this person, breaks the covenant bond of marriage by pursuing someone else. Anyone who has ever endured this pain knows how crushing it can be, how demoralizing, heartbreaking, infuriating, humiliating and humbling. Reactions vary from anger, violent retribution and flight to depression, self-loathing, deep sorrow and profound grief. If your love for your partner is not killed by the infidelity, the path to reconciliation can be arduous and sometimes futile.

Besides an unfaithful wife, Hosea's children are also scoundrels. Poor Hosea. Or stupid Hosea, one might say.

Getting back to the situation in the Northern Kingdom, the people are a wreck. In spite of God's steadfast love, they continue to worship foreign gods. With the fall of the Northern Kingdom, everything in their lives is threatened; just being able to grow crops is problematic in the midst of war, so they fall back on the worship of Baal, the storm god, because they need rain. Can't you hear them, these little unfaithful wretches, "Just this once, it's not that we don't revere and love the God of Israel, but we're hungry. This little sacrifice won't matter, this one flirtation with the god who controls the sweet water!" They are selfish, greedy and frightened and in their weakness they turn away from God.

The parallel is clear; not only does Hosea use the imagery of marriage as an archetype representing Israel's covenant with God, his own life also mirrors the situation that God faces with the unfaithful people of Israel. God loves Israel; Israel is unfaithful. Hosea loves Gomer; Gomer is unfaithful. That is the background; that is what we would know if we'd read the first ten chapters of the book. It is unfortunate that every Sunday we get snippets from books, gospels and letters that often are misinterpreted out of context. If we didn't know of Hosea's marital discord, we might not appreciate the tenderness of his heart when he speaks of God's profound and enduring love for Israel.

In what are surely some of the loveliest passages of the Bible, Hosea goes on in chapter 11 to liken God's love for Israel to that of a loving parent. He calls the people to remember all that God has done for them. The gentleness and loving imagery is maternal in nature and stands against the predominantly male imagery of God elsewhere in the

Bible. When, through Hosea, God speaks of lifting infants to her cheek, you can smell that newborn sweetness and feel the angel softness at the nape of a baby's neck. "I took them in my arms but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love."

All this love poured out for an unfaithful people who turn away. And yet, in the face of their rejection, even as God's heart recoils, God says, "my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim." You have to wonder if Hosea, whose heart had surely recoiled within him many times, had also gotten to this point with his family. Perhaps he had laid down the law so many times that Gomer took his threats with a grain of salt. Perhaps he had come to see that no matter how much he tried not to love her, he just couldn't help himself.

I should interject here that preaching on this can be dangerous because I don't mean to suggest that we should disregard unfaithfulness, that it is not very serious or that it should always be forgiven. After all, we're talking here about God and a prophet, not regular people with feet of clay.

I want to get back to that wonderful line about "the cords of human kindness, the bands of love." This week the phrase "cords of human kindness" has haunted me. As I've watched people stacking their wood for the winter and seen and heard logs being cut and split, I've thought of the ways we stockpile kindness, if in fact we do. I've wondered how we hold on to the acts of kindness, the demonstrations of love that come our way. All too often I think we focus on the slights, the hurts, the things that go wrong and pay less attention to the love that surrounds us. We tend to take for granted the extreme beauty of the earth that is itself a gift of love to my mind. We notice rebukes more readily than common, everyday courtesies.

This is the wedding season and I have the pleasure of officiating at quite a few weddings every summer. Although I'm perfectly fine with couples writing their own vows and crafting the ceremony to reflect their love and understanding, there is one thing in the liturgy that I insist upon. After the couple has exchanged vows, the marriage is pronounced and they have kissed, I ask that they not begin the recessional music and

march away in a kind of love ‘em and leave ‘em Hollywood fashion. I ask that we all join together in a prayer of thanksgiving because the world could have been different. We take the fact of love for granted in wedding ceremonies as we do in much of our lives. But it could have been otherwise; what if love were not so magnificently woven through creation and our hearts? So we thank God for the love that is witnessed and honored in that ceremony and so resplendently throughout our world.

I wonder how we might intentionally stack our own cords of human kindness, how we might acknowledge and treasure acts of compassion, generosity and love. Of course, we both receive and give kindness and are, therefore, called not just to acknowledge mercies given, but also intentionally to engage in acts of compassion and love. Our woodpile of kindness really grows, ironically, when we give it away.

Let’s put aside the image of the woodpile and look at what was actually meant by “cords of kindness and bands of love.” Incidentally, the term “bands of cloth” is the same term that is translated as “swaddling cloths” in Luke’s story of the nativity. What is being referred to here by cords of kindness and bands of love are what were known in ancient Israel as “leading strings.” They were lengths of rope or cloth that were given to toddlers when they were just beginning to walk. The adult held onto one end and the babies to the other. Of course, the greatest aid in learning to walk is an outstretched hand; this is the real cord of love.

Which brings us to the catch in this phrase, the word “human.” “I lead them with cords of human kindness.” God does not say “I lead them with cords of kindness,” but rather with “cords of human kindness.” God did not just pour out mysterious, sublime divine love, but human love. And for me, this changes everything. I trust God’s love and God’s forgiveness; I know deep in my heart that it is always there. But sometimes I don’t actually feel it; sometimes it just seems too far away. God knows better than anyone that we need tangible, real proof, that we are, by nature, a doubting people. This is why we need Jesus, human and divine, to incarnate the love of God in language and form we can understand.

There's a nice story I heard that testifies to this. There was a small boy, about five, who couldn't sleep one night. Just after his parents went to bed, when they fell into that deep, round sleep that swallows us in the first few hours down, he started calling to them. Drunk with slumber, his dad stumbled to his bedside.

"What's the matter, Kyle?"

"I can't sleep," he replied.

After ascertaining that he wasn't ill and assuring him that all was well, his dad straightened the covers, kissed his forehead and went back to bed. Thirty minutes later Kyle called again. Well, this went on for over three hours, his Mom and Dad taking turns trying to soothe him to sleep. Kyle said he was lonely so his Dad reminded him that he was never really alone, that God was always with him. This seemed to offer some solace and Kyle didn't call out for almost an hour. When he did call again and his father, shaking with fatigue, went to him, Kyle allowed that he was still lonely. With a tinge of exasperation, his Dad replied, "Kyle, remember I told you, God is with you?!"

And Kyle said, in a very soft voice, "I know, but sometimes I just need someone with skin on."

Someone with skin on. So often it is through our love for each other that we come to know God. It is through the things that tie us together with bands of love that we come to know steadfast love and devotion. The flip side is that when those bands of love are broken, when we focus on what divides us rather than on what unites us, we wander away from God.

In a wonderful article in the Christian Century this week, Elizabeth Myer Bolton talks about Hosea's powerful prophetic message, his call to remember how God has been with us and promises to stay with us as well as God's call to repent and turn from idolatry and the worship of false gods. Myer Bolton is talking about the kind of separation we feel when we focus on divisions and material things instead of the bonds of love. This is what Paul is talking about as well when he condemns the people's obsession with things of the world. Myer Bolton relates this story in light of the Hosea passage:

“A friend of mine is pastoring a small church in Chicago that is experiencing its own chaos and upheaval: the church almost split this winter over the color of the carpet in the ladies’ parlor. On the night of the vote, the Northern Kingdom (the Maroon Camp) wouldn’t speak to the Southern Kingdom (the Forest Green Camp), and the moderator had to call for a secret ballot, the first in 75 years.

While they were voting, thousands of Haitians were leaving their makeshift homes to wade through rubble in order to hold an open-air worship service and conduct a national day of mourning. They lifted up their hands and their voices to remember the thousands of people buried in mass graves without a funeral, without flowers, without anyone sharing scripture’s proclamation of resurrection for the body and newness of life.

My colleague called me from her office a few hours after the vote. . . she was angry with herself and her people. While worshipping the carpet as if it were Baal, they did nothing to remember, to soothe the pain or to help put back together the brokenness of the world.” (The Christian Century. July 2010. p. 20)

As individuals and as congregations we can get distracted, derailed by the worship of various idols. Perhaps the exercise this week is to summon the courage to ask ourselves if what we are doing, what we are focusing on, thinking about, praying about, paying for places another log on our wood pile of kindness and love.

On Friday afternoon I stood in a beautiful old wooden church in the hills of central Vermont. Built in 1823 it has neat wooden box pews, relies only woodstoves for heat and is essentially unchanged from the time it was built. I was leading a wedding rehearsal, one of our culture’s most high-energy events. This rehearsal was especially fraught with electricity—even though there is none in the building—because there were 18 attendants. Believe me, it’s like herding kittens. As we were standing in our positions practicing, one more time, the processional, the groom, who is inclined toward fastidiousness and worry, looked at me with tears in his eyes and a loving smile on his face. “How are you doing?” I asked. “The only thing I’m worried about,” he said, “is that because we’re running late we’re holding you up. That’s the only thing I’m worried about now.” Which for him was saying a lot.

And as he said this I heard the neat clunk of a log land on my woodpile. For this wonderful man who has been the prime organizer, planner and executor of their wedding to stand there and worry about my schedule was an act of human kindness. But looking at him in the late afternoon light, I remembered, I remembered past acts of love in that space. Hosea would have been proud. What I remembered is that 31 years ago this month I stood in exactly that spot in that sanctuary with the afternoon sun pouring through the windows and looked at another young man who was looking at me with waves of love and promising to love me forever. I felt wrapped in swaddling clothes, tied to God by human love.

Amen.