

The Reverend Patricia Phaneuf Alexander  
Proper 13 (C) ~ August 3, 2025  
St. Dunstan's, Bethesda  
Hosea 11:1-11  
Psalm 107:1-9, 43  
Luke 12:13-21

*When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the further they went from me...I took them up in my arms, but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with bands of human kindness, with cords of love. I treated them like those who lift infants to their cheeks; I bent down to them and fed them...My people are bent on turning away from me.*

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*

What an evocative image!

Whether or not we ourselves are parents, we all have been children, and we know the extent of our own adolescent, immature ingratitude. We also may understand something of the pain of giving and giving and giving to someone who – for whatever reason – not only does not reciprocate, but out-and-out rejects us. It can be devastating.

This, my friends, is precisely how the prophet Hosea imagines God, as a parent lamenting over ungrateful, inconstant children. *And* loving them, nevertheless.

I'll say more about that in a moment. But first, some background:

Hosea lived eight hundred years before Christ, during the last twenty-five years or so of the golden era of "United Monarchy" between the Kingdoms of Israel in the north and Judah in the south. In a relatively short time, Israel saw tremendous political upheaval, with the rise and fall of many kings – many of whom were worse than the one who preceded him. Finally, weakened by conflict, Israel fell to Assyria, a constellation of city-states in roughly what is now Kuwait, Syria, Turkey, Iraq, and Iran.

Let's pause and ponder that for a moment. Sobering, isn't it?

Eventually the Israelites were carried away into captivity, and over time they began worshiping the local gods (small “g”) – gods like the Baals, who promised immediate satisfaction. It was transactional, a business deal: Just worship them, and one would be blessed with a season of fertility and abundance. *Quid pro quo*. Vending machine god.

We probably can understand how a desperate people who have lost everything might make this choice. They were vulnerable to persuasion, and they had to feed their children's bellies – even when reason and a sense of loyalty might suggest otherwise.

When we are hurting, when we are feeling defeated, we do not always make the best or most noble decisions.

And it was in this context that Hosea emerged as a prophet, called to do what prophets always do: Bring the people back into relationship with their God (capital “G”). Hosea is one of the most passionate and compelling voices in all of Hebrew Scripture. Or, as one biblical scholar puts it, in Hosea “we penetrate deeper into the heart and mind of God than anywhere in the Old Testament.”<sup>1</sup> And if this is true, then the depiction of God here is one of deep sadness at betrayal and rejection, on the one hand, *and* of abiding, abundant love, on the other. Both/*and*. Not either/*or*.

Unlike the local, “small g” gods, the Baals, the God understood by Israel, known by Jesus, and worshipped by the Church, is a God of relationship. Like a devoted father or mother who stands by his or her children and wants only what is right and healthy and best for them, Hosea says, so too does God remain faithful to us even in those moments when we cannot or will not receive God's love. I am reminded of all those times when, in a fit of adolescent *angst*, I screamed vicious things at my parents. *And*...Instead of kicking me to the curb, which – in an “eye for an eye”

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<sup>1</sup> H. D. Beeby, *Hosea: Grace Abounding* (International Theological Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 140.

world they would have had every right to do – they kept on loving me, however humanly and imperfectly.

I also am reminded of those times when I heard that very same language coming from my own dear children when they were younger. As a social worker friend always reminds me, this is perfectly appropriate. It is the developmental task of the child to break away, to differentiate, from the parent. But the call as parent is to be constant, to keep loving, to keep showing up, and not to walk away – even when most tempted to do exactly that.

Of course, not every parent is able to live up to that call, for any number of reasons. No human parents always get it exactly right. In fact, we so often get it exactly *wrong*. The same can be said of us as human children.

Many of us here this morning have been through more than our share of heartache in recent times:

- Illness
- The death of a loved one
- Unemployment (or the threat thereof)
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Addiction
- Broken relationships
- Conflict
- Guilt
- Shame
- Etc., etc., etc.

The past several years have been particularly challenging for all of us. And you may have noticed that sometimes when folks are struggling, they “disappear” themselves from those who matter most – siblings, spouses, friends, colleagues, other Church members...and even God.

Perhaps you've done this yourself. I know I have.

When we are hurting, when we are feeling defeated, we do not always make the best or most noble decisions.

So we may be tempted to walk away, rather than staying engaged and working out the struggle. Unfortunately, that leaves no chance for healing or resolution or new life.

How many of us have lost friendships or have strained family relationships over the current state of our country, for example? Please do not misunderstand me: There is no judgment here. That would be completely hypocritical. I'm just suggesting that we all need to pray and reflect on our own impulses – however understandable they may be.

Because, tempting as it is to turn our backs, there is immeasurable grace in continuing to show up, to keep loving. Our call as people of faith is to remain in relationship with God and with one another, even when those relationships are most challenging. *Especially* when they are most challenging. **Caveat: There are times when it is both appropriate and necessary to walk away, as in the case of violence or abuse. I am not advocating remaining in a painful or dangerous situation.** That is not everyone's call – and remember that call is aspirational: It is an invitation to lean into the larger life that God envisions for us. We don't always get it right on the first try, or the tenth, or the one hundredth. Sometimes we never get it right. But the call is the goal for which we press on, the path on which we point our feet, the reason we strive to stay engaged.

Continuing to show up is one of the marks of true Christian discipleship – because holding on to God and to our relationship with Christ and with one another, even in the face of strife or dissension, changes us. It makes us stronger. It transforms us more and more into the people God envisions and intends us to be.

People may fail us – people *will* fail us – but God says,

*How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?... My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.*

It's worth noting that, in Hebrew, the word for "compassion" is etymologically connected with the word for "womb." They share the same three-letter root.<sup>2</sup> This suggests that God's compassion, God's mercy, God's ability to understand and empathize with us, is all *relational* – or, perhaps better put, *gestational*. God loves us fiercely, protectively, and correctively, precisely because God is so connected to us as nurturing parent. The umbilical cord between us and God is long and everlasting. *Nothing* can sever it...at least from God's side. We always can choose to cut ourselves off from God; that's the subject of another sermon.

For all of God's grief and pain and disappointment at human behavior, God's faithfulness endures. Period. If anyone ever asks you to summarize the story of the Bible, you might say exactly that. I am reminded of a verse of the hymn we sang a few weeks ago, number 379 in the *Hymnal*, "God is Love":

*God is Love; and Love enfolds us,  
all the world in one embrace:  
with unfailing grasp God holds us,  
every child of every race.  
And when human hearts are breaking  
under sorrow's iron rod,  
then we find that selfsame aching  
deep within the heart of God.*

By virtue of having been borne from the womb of God, we are connected not only with God, but also with one another.

How can we give up on God, or on our siblings – fellow fallible humans who struggle every bit as we do?

*Amen.*

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<sup>2</sup> <https://hebrewwordlessons.com/2017/11/26/womb-creation-compassion/>