

July 31, 2016

TEXT: Hosea 11:1–11

TITLE: Finding our Way After Going Astray

Remember career day at school? Remember days in elementary school when special guests came to the classroom and talked about their careers? The adults would stand in front of the students and perhaps hold up a sign saying, “I’m a firefighter. I’m a police officer. I’m a doctor. I’m a scientist.” Can you picture that? Now imagine God visiting the class on career day. What would God’s sign say? For the scientific-skeptical among us, God’s sign may say, “I am a celestial watchmaker. I created life and set the world in motion, although I haven’t done much lately.” For the spiritual-not-religious folk among us, God’s sign may say, “I am a motivational speaker, that inner voice offering encouragement when you’re struggling and comfort when you’re in trouble.” For some of you, God’s sign says, “I am a judge—the enforcer of right vs. wrong, the one who punishes you for your mistakes.” For some God’s sign says, “I am an accountant, keeping track of your sins and preparing your balance sheet to be audited at the Last Judgment.”

But the prophet Hosea offers a better way to imagine what’s written on God’s Career Day sign. The sign would simply say, “I’m a Parent—mother-father to you all.” Now, to those of you who are parents, you may be quick to say, “Look, I’m a parent too but I make a lot of mistakes and I’m sure not God!” Others of you may say, “I know parents who harm and abuse their children, so I’m not sure this job description is a good one for God.” Fortunately, on career day, the guests before the class each get to speak for themselves a bit. God gets to say a few words about what it means to be a Mother-Father, part of which we heard in today’s scripture. In Hosea chapter 11 God says, “When my people were children, I loved them. I taught them to walk. When they stumbled, I picked them up. I guide them with kindness and love. I comfort them like holding a crying infant near to your cheek. I bend down to them, feed them, raise them, and love them.”

There is vividness to Hosea’s words about our Parent God. The Lord isn’t an unmoved mover high in the sky, or a vague spirit glimpsed from the corner of our eye, or the stern judge with a gavel anxious to condemn us for our wrongs. No, God is before us, near to us, anxious about us, as a mother or father caring for their children. So, if “parent” is what it says on God’s career day sign, then what does that say about us, as God’s children, siblings in God’s global family?

Now things get a bit messier. When God speaks in Hosea, our imperfections as children are also noted. Vs. 2—*The more I called them, the more they went from me, chasing false gods.* Vs. 3—*I took them up in my arms, but they didn’t acknowledge that I healed them.* Vs. 7—*My people, my children, are bent on turning away from me.* It’s true; we are prone to stray away from our heavenly Parent. Think of all the times when you were a toddler someone said—“Come back here. Don’t wander off. Stay where I can see you.” Or how often you’ve had to speak those words to a child under your care. We disobey. We go astray.

I remember being quite young and in a swimming pool with my Dad. My older brother was going to dive, so my dad had me sit on the top step in the shallow end and said, “Stay right there. Don’t go off that step.” I remember looking into the water, seeing the next step, and being sure I could reach it with my foot. And then I remember looking at the water from beneath the surface, flailing and splashing my arms, until I felt my father’s hands hoist me up and set me sputtering once more on the top step, laughing and saying, “I told you to stay on the top step.”

Why don’t we listen? Why do we go astray? There are as many answers to those questions as there are people seated before me. Like impatient toddlers, we disregard the instructions told to us and step willingly into dangerous and deep waters. Like prodigal sons and daughters, we get tired of where we are so we take what we can and set off for other places, even when that leads us down paths we should never travel. Yes, there is a value in trying new things and pushing against life’s limits. But we are meant to show initiative and creativity only in righteous, faithful ways, not impulsive, prideful, or foolish ways.

Sometimes we are led astray by false guides. There’s the story of two gas company workers—an older supervisor and a younger trainee—who were reading meters in a city neighborhood. At the last house on the block, they waved at the elderly woman looking out her kitchen window as they read her gas meter. Done for the day, the senior supervisor challenged his younger co-worker to a race back to the truck. So they took off running—and halfway there they realized the little old lady was running behind them and catching up to them. They stopped and asked her what was wrong. Gasping for air, she said, “When I saw two men from the gas company running as hard as possible away from my house, I figured I’d better run too!”

We are led astray by false guides. We are misled by worldly wisdom that is at odds with God’s wisdom. When Hosea offered his words about God the Mother-Father, Israel was being overrun by Assyrians. Violence was rampant in their cities. Oracle-priests, false leaders led people in the wrong directions and harmed them through misguided schemes. Sadly, violence remains an active part of the human experience, here in America and around the world. Writer and theologian Wendell Berry reminds us that one reason violence is all around us—in war zones, in how we use and exploit the land for quick economic gain—is because it is immensely profitable to do so. “People do not become wealthy by treating one another or the world kindly and with respect.”¹ Profits tied to environmental and social violence will always lead us away from God’s will.

The concentration of power, whether in individuals or in corporations, historically had not led to greater freedom or greater economic justice. Four companies, Tyson, JBS, Cargill, and Smithfield foods, now produce 85% of all US beef, yet meat prices have risen steadily since 2006. Four airlines, American, Delta, Southwest and United, now control 80% of the US market, yet despite record low fuel costs, air travel prices and company profits have hit all-time highs. Twenty-five years ago, the top five banks held 10% of the nation’s bank assets. Now they hold almost 50%. Walgreens bought RiteAid, combining two of the three largest drugstores. Insurance giants Aetna and Anthem

bought Humana and Cigna; Heinz bought Kraft. A new Gilded Age of power and profit consolidation is upon us and modern false prophets would have us forget one simple truth: Inequality is not a byproduct of technology, of globalization, or the uneven distribution of human skill and virtues. Inequality is a choice²—it is an agenda and a policy implemented by worldly children who have gone astray.

God stands at the front of the class, holding the sign of a parent. Before God sit a few students paying attention to the presentation. Others are distracted. Others wear earbuds and headphones hearing different words. Others are bent down focused on counting what's in their wallets, or turned around pushing violently against their neighbors. Yet God's response to all this has never changed over the centuries: *How can I give you up? How can I hand you over? My heart recoils from such thoughts. My compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not respond in wrath, for I am God and not mortal.*

Christianity has little to offer if the God we proclaim is simply a heavenly watchmaker, active in the beginning but unmoved by today's pain and brokenness. Christianity has little to offer if God is a flimsy spirit occasionally tweaking our conscience, or a stern judge who only exists to condemn and cast us aside for our inevitable unrighteousness. What does have worth is Hosea's God—the Mother-Father who cannot give us up, who cannot be provoked to anger like a thin-skinned politician, who will not renege on our covenant of love. That's why the Prodigal knows where to turn because the loving Father has always been there waiting for him. The crying child knows when healing begins once the cheek of the loving Mother is felt in an embrace. When every sputtering child drowning in something that's over their heads is lifted up, the first thing he or she sees is a parent's face. And there's a name for where this heavenly Parent resides—a name for the spiritual quality of life shaped by compassion, equality, mercy and love. We call it “home.”

We sometimes use the phrase—our church “home.” This is a place where we pray not particularly eloquently but at least honestly. This is a place where we come together sometimes awkwardly but at least willingly. This is a place of familiar words and stories, of scripture worth grappling with and taking seriously, of cycles of Christmas and Easter—birth, death, and resurrection—that speak to our hearts. In this home we encounter a parent, Creator, Redeemer, Spirit, who says, “I cannot give you up or abandon you.” A parent who follows us outside these walls. A parent who is with us to the end of time. This good news has so much to offer. Not just for you, but for everyone. Welcome home, says the Lord.

AMEN

¹ Wendell Berry, *Our Only World*, “The Commerce of Violence,” p. 18.

² “Rewriting the Rules of the American Economy,” Roosevelt Institute; quoted in NYT Magazine, July 24, 2016, p. 32.