

August 7 Hosea 11:1-11 God's Faithful Love for his children

Parenting and raising children is a deeply emotional journey with the swinging between love and compassion, and, discipline and pain. From the time a baby is born entering the world we are awe-struck by this miracle of new life in the form of a child. This is an amazing experience that touches the heart deeply. Then there are those other moments as a parent that developmental milestones are reached that include baby's first smile at you, growing a tooth, eating solid food, first words, crawling for the first time, then of course standing and eventually taking those first steps and walking which leads to running or should I say and the parent chasing. The child that you provide for, care for, carry, push and drive around becomes old enough to attend kindergarten then leaves and begins at school. Throughout this time we are teaching, guiding, training and instructing our children how to live, how to speak, how to act and do things from a good motivation of heart and hopefully from a morally right perspective.

And as our children grow they continually test the boundaries along the way along with your resolve to enforce those boundaries and carry through with any discipline and consequences. Eventually our children, grand children, nieces and nephews 'individuate' which means they begin to decide on just what it is that they themselves think and believe and how they will live and act. This process coupled with the turbulent teenage and twenties where they are having their bodies grow and change, brains rewired and fully developed in all areas, make for many heart wrenching moments for parents and family. Will they survive it? Will they come to believe, live and act in accordance with God's standards and Christ's morality or will they choose to live according to the flesh and the world's morality, standards, philosophies and reasoning? And if they choose a mixture or go completely the other way, will they ever come back?

Personally, all I've got to do to appreciate this is think of my own upbringing and what I put my parents through and now, the process of having my own nearly three teenage children. Parenting requires a lot of love, compassion, forgiving mercy along with exercising 'tough love' when the situation requires it including discipline, and also not rescuing when it's appropriate as your children learn and grow and make their own decisions which will lead to potential mistakes, which can make for pain and suffering.

Parenthood is certainly one long emotional roller coaster. And no one knows this better than Our Father in Heaven. For God had made a Covenant with his young child Israel at Mount Sinai after He brought them out of captivity in Egypt. And after 40 years of leading and instructing in the wilderness the children entered the Promised Land, Israel. Once there, they began to clear the land of its evil inhabitants, to then settle down, and prosper, even asking God for their own human King so that they might be just like the nations surrounding them had, rather than continue to be ruled directly by God Almighty. Then after only three Kings, Saul, David and Solomon, Israel was divided into two kingdoms, and steeped in idolatry, worshipping in the northern Kingdom of Israel, otherwise named Ephraim after its largest Israelite tribe, amongst other gods, Baal. They each in their own communities took their offerings of cattle, grain and incense to make sacrifices to the god Baal's idol. In committing such spiritual adultery God had two choices. Firstly, God could end the covenant with them or secondly, renew the covenant, the reason being His Love, compassion and faithfulness.

It was in this context that Hosea prophesied about the middle of the 8th Century BC. He wrote his book around 722-721 BC just after the fall of the Northern Kingdom's capital, Samaria. He was living in the final tragic days of the Northern Kingdom.

Contained within this book is his poem that was very creatively rewritten and performed for us as a RAP this morning by Mary and the music team. It's this chapter that tells us what a Loving and faithful Parent will do with an errant child who has turned their back and walked away while demonstrating from the Divine perspective how God's own heart is wrenched and emotionally torn apart as He deals with this child. Hosea speaks of God as a loving parent who looks back on Israel's history the way a parent looks back on the highlights of a child's growing up years. And Hosea speaks the words of a broken-hearted God who experiences the feelings of a parent, *"When Israel was a child I loved him"* v.1. This verse traces God's historical choice of Israel back to Egypt with the exodus from that country that gave birth to the nation of Israel, the child who God loved. But then the child Israel, instead of returning to the Lord (v.2) went farther into Baal worship by choosing to attribute to Baal the blessings that came from God. Then God reminisces v.3. *"It was I who taught Israel to walk..."*

This picture of a father teaching his child to walk is one of the most tender in the Old Testament especially when you couple it with the father lifting the little child in his arms to his own cheek v.4. This 'holding' is an encouragement to let the child know that they are so precious.

But this along with the provision of God through providing for them and feeding his child was not enough. God the Father who raised his child and then shared everything with them, as this child grew up he rebelled and turned on the Father taking advantage of his generosity. But, Israel has rebelled in breaking the 10 commandments, as a result, they will suffer severe consequences, with the tender tone of the Father changing drastically vv5-7...

Hosea proclaims that Israel would face imminent defeat and exile. He named the nation who would capture and subdue Israel as Assyria. Even with the Prophet's threat of exile, the Israelites it appears thought themselves safe in their fortified cities, so he adds, that there was no reason for them to trust in their fortresses, or their false prophets, for the Lord could by the sword destroy all their cities. The people refuse to repent and are determined to turn from God, to turn from all that God has done for them. And as such a loving and faithful Father, God's remaining desire is that they will know him and experience his love in spite of their hypocrisy. The truth remains however that into exile they must go.

But then just like any parent God here is emotionally torn apart. One moment He's angry and naturally says I'm going to bring severe consequences. But then the next moment he's heart broken, and then he's moved by his mercy and compassion and going to forgive the very child he's giving up. Although God allowed Israel to be conquered by Assyria and to face the consequences there is still hope for God's desire is not to fully or forever abandon his people. In the following verses, Hosea records a conversation God has within himself debating about the punishment that Israel deserves, and the merciful love, which God forever shows. Verses 8-11:

"How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I treat you like Admah? How can I make you like Zeboiim? My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I devastate Ephraim again. For I am God, and not man- the Holy One among

you. I will not come against their cities. They will follow the Lord; he will roar like a lion. When he roars, his children will come trembling from the west. They will come trembling like birds from Egypt, like doves from Assyria. I will settle them in their homes, declares the Lord.”

Hosea had said before, that though the Lord would deal severely with his people, there would yet be some moderation in his wrath, so that he would not destroy the whole people. Now, it follows, that God, after having restrained himself, will extend his favour even to the restoration of the people, bringing them a future hope through a promise to return from exile.

This faithful love leads Hosea through his prophecy to the end. It is this love that leads this prophet to speak to those who do not listen, to those who will not hear. It is this same love, which lets all of us, continue in our lives before God. We hear and read in God's word about the love, and we are offered again a chance at repentance, again the opportunity to turn and change our lives.

We may wonder what Hosea has to offer us today. First and foremost, Hosea's word is a remarkable testament to God's loving mercy and his desire to save and restore his people. And this testament to God's resolve leads us directly into the new covenant that we have in Jesus Christ. Hosea paves the way for Jesus, making his gospel of mercy and love a continuation of something that has been a part of the Old Testament prophetic tradition.

A second thing that Hosea shows us today is that, just as in the case of the prodigal Son Luke 15, our being lost is never too large for God to handle. Hosea speaks of a people, a nation led by a loving God, a people who lose their way over, and over again in their history. A people who are filled with ingratitude at all that God had done for them. But still, as lost as they are, God as a faithful and loving father finds and brings them home to resettle them. And when the Father does this the burdens of the child are lifted. And this is cause for a celebration, in heaven as it is on earth. None of us is beyond the reach of God the Father's faithful mercy and forgiving love. Hosea's word today calls us to repent. Just as our Lord calls on us to turn and follow him with our lives, Hosea calls on his people to make the turn. As we heard the story of Israel's punishment, can we believe that we are immune? Can we believe that God has nothing planned for us?

Can we believe that our lives are our own to live, and that God does not really care anymore?

Hosea is the greatest evangelist in the Old Testament. And just as God's child Israel, we need to heed his call. Hear God's call that you have and I have sinned. Hear God's call that we must repent. Turn away from sin, turn away from the world, and turn again to your God and you will receive the blessing of His faithful forgiving and merciful love that is reserved for his children.

[RAP] Hosea Spoken Word poem:

When you were a child
I loved you as my Son
But the louder I called you
The faster you'd run

I tried to teach you right from wrong
But you refused to hear my song

I held you in my arms
Nurtured and fed you
Tried to keep you from all harms

Besieged on all sides
You cry out for help
But none will hear
But I, who loves you

I feel your pain
I've come to rescue you
And bring you home again.