

Wandering

Hosea 11:1-11; Colossians 3:1-11

Whitefish UMC

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- † Have you seen the public service announcement playing on TV lately in which a teenager sits in a Laundromat and watches as another young man bursts in threatening the people there? His face is gaunt and scarred from drug use. He steals their money and then approaches the teenager in the corner.
- † As the teenager looks up and sees his own face, the thief yells, “This was not supposed to be your life!” Although it is meant to be a warning to young people not to try meth, it still pulls at the heart of every parent who fears for the safety of their children. And at a deeper level, it resonates with each of us for our own lives—even when we haven’t abused drugs.
- † At its core, this is one of the oldest stories there is. It first gets told in Genesis. It gets told a thousand different ways throughout the pages of the Bible. God loves us, entirely. God creates us, delivers us, and tends us. The more God pursues, the more we turn away. It is the story of our foolishness. It is the story of God’s grace.
- † We know how the story ends. God does not give up. Maybe our knowledge of the ending dulls our hearing of the retelling of grace that once was amazing. As one writer puts it, “Hosea does not tell, he shows. What he shows are portraits of a love whose beginnings we cannot remember and whose end echoes with a roar of transforming power. He walks us down the

long hall of our communal memory and points to the pictures hanging on its wall.”

- † In my mother’s house, before she had to move to an assisted living facility, the wall along the staircase leading to the second floor provided just such a photo gallery of our family. I imagine that many of you have such a portrait wall as well. There you will find pictures of chubby babies, adorable toddlers, toothless second graders, awkward adolescents, fresh-faced high school graduates, brides, grooms, and succeeding generations.
- † God has such a portrait wall, too. God remembers young Israel, little Ephraim (two of the twelve tribes of Israel)—recalls bending to feed him, teaching him to walk, leading him, holding him, calling out his name. But God’s memories are pained by the images God sees. The people are running, running still in a mad return to enslavement. The once liberated nation of Israel has invested its freedom in bad religion, bad politics, bad social arrangements.
- † In the words of Hosea, we hear this parenting God who watches as the people of Israel become more and more distant. “They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me. The sword rages in their cities, it consumes their priests, it devours because of their schemes.”
- † These aren’t words of punishment; rather they are a recognition of the consequences that follow the choices of a headstrong and wayward people. Hosea walks us down the hall, showing us portraits of things we cannot remember, perhaps because we would rather not. There are pictures of how we ran when God called; pictures of the tantrums we threw, the promises we broke, the wreckage we created; pictures of our violence, our hatred, our self-loathing.

- † We are the children who were loved from the start; we are the children who turned away. God stood on the porch calling after us as we sped away. We broke God’s heart—each of us—at some point in our lives.
- † Many of us have experienced this same kind of grief in our own families. Perhaps we have a child who is estranged from us, won’t speak to us. Perhaps we have lost a child to illness, accident, or suicide. Maybe it is we who have cut off relationship with our parent, or we wish we could.
- † We even experience this sadness in our church family. I have probably bored you enough with my reflections stimulated by the photographs Dawn has put as a slideshow on my screen saver on my computer. Sometimes the photographs bring back a wonderful memory—as they did with Ben Donahue’s baptism four years ago—but often they are a poignant reminder of a child who has since abandoned God, of a family who is now estranged from us, or worse yet, of a child or parent-like member who has died too soon.
- † And yet God’s words in the face of such disappointment, grief, and loss can be a lesson for us, we who are created in the image of God but sometimes forget who we are. Again, Hosea speaks the words of God, the broken-hearted parent, “My heart recoils within me; {instead of anger} my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger....”
- † As the anger subsides and the love is rekindled, God will find a way for grace to prevail. God is not trapped by a set of laws, because God is ultimately in charge. In the wisdom of God, grace and justice are intertwined. Justice has an openness to the need for mercy, and grace has as its goal justice for all.
- † God wants us to come home, to be at home with ourselves and with one another. Wrath and revenge are never God’s ultimate goal; so if that is true,

they can never be ours either. We may rage in anger or betrayal, but beneath the anger is loss and the deep desire to be made whole and for relationships to be restored, even if not exactly as before.

- † We long to return to a home and community that loves each one into living the life we were meant to live. And that is also the longing at the heart of God.
- † That is why God chose to come to us as love incarnate through Jesus of Nazareth. We are here because we want to follow Him. But often we don't do so well. I love this parable from the Buddhist tradition, recounted by Calum McLeod:
 - † *A guru was so impressed by the spiritual progress of his disciple that judging he needed no further guidance, he left him on his own in a little hut on the banks of a river. Each morning after his daily washing, the disciple would hang his loincloth out to dry. It was his only possession. One day he was dismayed to find that it was torn to shreds by rats. So he had to beg for another from the villagers. Now when the rats nibbled holes in this one too, he got himself a kitten. He'd no more trouble with rats, but now in addition to begging for his own food, he had to beg for milk as well. Too much trouble begging, he thought, and too much of a burden on the villagers. I shall keep a cow. Now when he got the cow, he had to beg for fodder. Easier to till the land around my hut, he thought. But that proved troublesome too, for it left him little time for meditation. So he employed laborers to till the land for him. Now overseeing the laborers itself became a chore, so he married a wife who would share this task with him. Before long, of course, he was one of the wealthiest men in the village. Years later his guru happened to drop by and was surprised to see a palatial mansion where*

once a hut had stood. He said to one of the servants, “Isn’t this where a disciple of mine used to live?” Before he got a reply the disciple himself emerged. “What’s the meaning of all this, my son,” asked the guru? “You’re not going to believe this, sir,” said the man, “but there was no other way I could keep my loincloth.”

- † We may want to follow Jesus, to end our wandering and come home to God’s embrace, but we end up like the disciple trying to protect his loincloth—overburdened with the preoccupations of our busy lives. The writer of Colossians is familiar with this problem and reminds us to live, albeit imperfectly, with intention and grace.
- † How is this possible? In a few moments we will experience one of the ways in which these tensions can be reconciled. The poet Kate Compton reminds us like this:
 - † *Thank you, scandalous God,
For giving yourself to the world,
Not in the powerful and extraordinary
But in weakness and the familiar
In a baby
In bread and wine.*
- † In the Eucharist, in Holy Communion, we take our lives and break them and give them in fulfillment of what our Lord did and does. Anglican Bishop Steven Bayne says: “Jesus took his life in his own hands. This is freedom. He broke it—this is obedience. He gave it—this is love. And he still does these simple acts at every table and in every heart that will have its soul and time and eternity meet.”

- † So we are called by God and called to understand our brokenness and live it and to share and to give and to love—even when we are tempted to rage and resent instead. Hear these words from Denise Levertov’s poem, “Altar:”
- † Thy presence is made known
By untraced interventions
Like those legendary baskets filled
With bread and wine, discovered
At the door by someone at wit’s end
Returning home empty-handed
After a day of looking for work.
- † In this meal of remembrance, we cease, even if just for a moment, our wandering and come home to who we are meant to be. We become the body of Christ, broken and shared for the healing of the world.
- † For we remember that on the night....

Sources:

Calum McCleod, “Above and Below” <http://fourthchurch.org>

Rev. Mimi Walker, “Broken Hearted God,” <http://day1.org>

Stacy Simpson Duke, “Hosea 11:1-11” in Feasting on the Word, 2010.