

## “Hosea: Love without End”

July 19, 2020

*Old School: Prophets Series* – Livestream

Yesterday, we learned of the death of Rep. John Lewis and C.T. Vivian. The list of their work, especially around civil rights and peace with justice, is long, and their prophetic witness is clear. They reminded us that we have a moral obligation to do and say something when we see what’s not right or fair or just and that silence isn’t an option. They offer powerful examples as we focus on the prophets and hear the prophetic witness in our own time. Lewis asked of himself and others when it came to the work of justice: “If not us, then who? If not now, then when?”

Last week, Amos taught us about justice. Today, Hosea lifts up love as the foundation of God’s character. God’s love isn’t without the reality of God’s grief, disappoint, and judgment, but it’s where God ultimately lands when it comes to us. And I was challenged by Dr. Cornel West as I thought about the connection between love and justice: “Justice is what love looks like in public, just like tenderness is what love feels like in private.” A prophetic word...

And even as we talk about prophets, whether in our time or long ago, we know they’re not always popular. Many of those we lift up now endured years of struggle, death threats, and pain trying to draw attention to the way things ought to be rather than the way things are. We may think of John Lewis, C.T. Vivian, and others who fought so hard for equality and revere them, but sometimes we forget the struggle. Prophets don’t have it easy.

And Hosea is no exception. If you read through his story, you might think it scandalous. Remember that biblical prophets are truth-tellers and fore-tellers - messengers of God who share what God wants from God’s people – and what the consequences will be if God’s people don’t change their ways. Hosea has some words for the people about how far away they’ve strayed. But Hosea’s role as a prophet is even more dramatic.

Frederick Buechner says that Hosea starts out like one of the street preachers we might have seen somewhere before with a sign that says: **SHOW SLIDE THE END IS NEAR**, and his call from God is strange.

Hosea shows us family dysfunction at its best. His life mirrors God’s disappoint with God’s people. His wife, Gomer, is unfaithful, and Hosea even goes to bring her back – to buy her back - after she’s sold into slavery.

Their children are named by God, and the names reflect God’s disappoint with God’s people – one named for place of a bloody battle and the other two mean “no

mercy” and “not my people.” There’s a warning there – the northern kingdom will fall, and God’s heart is grieved by the people turning away from God. But the bigger story is about God’s love for God’s people. God loved them with an everlasting love and blessed them. They were prosperous, and they honored God for a time, but then they turned to worshipping idols and rejected God. And yet God pursues them. God wants them back!

Hosea’s life is a living parable, much like what we saw in the video called “Loved.” Through Hosea, God’s focus is love. The Hebrew word is *hesed*, usually translated “steadfast love.” It’s love that’s persistent – love that doesn’t quit – love without end. Hosea continues to love Gomer and do everything he can to show her love, even when she’s unfaithful.

And God does the same with God’s people - continuing to love and care when even when they’re unfaithful, even when it seems they’ve forgotten their Maker. God’s desire is that they understand God’s love for them - and that they acknowledge God and love God in return.

Reading through Hosea can bring back painful memories of our own relationships if there’s been struggle within our family. This story of infidelity is painful and powerful. We feel for Hosea. The way God uses human relationships to describe spiritual intimacy with God is striking - a faithful spouse to one who is unfaithful.

And then in chapter 11, it’s the loving parent and child - a child with whom the parent eventually struggled, the one who ran away, the one who strayed, the one who sought after something else. For anyone who has struggled in parenting or who has a strained relationship with a child, it cuts deep. We feel for God.

It’s a tender image, and it’s almost like God is flipping through the baby book and remembering. Here’s what I did to care for my child - my people. We can imagine the pictures of a loving father dotting over a baby. We can picture a loving mother using her two fingers to help her toddler learn to walk. We can see a caring parent picking up a child when they scrape a knee, kissing it, and putting on a band-aid. We can watch as a loving parent looks at a child with every ounce of love in their heart or lifts the child and squeezes them against their cheek or gets down on the floor to play or feeds them with a spoon. God recounts their history together - and it’s the story of how God has loved and cared for them - how God has saved them and how they’ve strayed.

God is pained and upset - and has a plan for their punishment. God has every right to judge the people for the ways they’ve turned away. And we get a sense of God’s struggle – it’s very human. We get mad and want to react, and then we stop.

*How can I give you up? How can I hand you over?* God’s heart is broken, but God doesn’t give up. God is gracious. This is how God works. It’s not always how we work. And I’m not here to say that the struggles we’ve experienced with loved ones haven’t impacted us. They have, and they do. We struggle to forgive. Sometimes we want

revenge. We want others to hurt as badly as we do. But God is clear that God's ways aren't our ways. (Thank God!) Where would we be if God treated us with us the same way we sometimes treat each other?

God wants the people to know that ultimately God will love no matter what. That doesn't mean there won't be consequences for their actions, but love is the end word. The image of a parent loving a child is a powerful one, and though that may not resonate perfectly for all of us, God wants Hosea to share it. God wants the people to know they are loved deeply.

Hosea shows us the heart of God – love that doesn't end. Hosea shows us the height, depth, and breadth of God's love. It's love that we don't deserve, but that's exactly why we call it grace. It's undeserved and unmerited. Grace is a gift offered to us without price, and God offers it constantly. God's love and compassion limits God's desire for revenge and wrath.

What we hear in Hosea is a new message from *THE END IS NEAR*. Perhaps he ends up with a new sign **SHOW SLIDE: GOD'S LOVE – THERE'S NO END TO IT.**

God wants the people to give up their straying away, come back to God, and experience amazing grace and love. God wants to be acknowledged. God wants to offer mercy. God's love is redemptive. And it shows even for Hosea and his family. The names that his children were given are changed as a result of God's love and care.

We love and follow God in response to God's love, but we can so easily forget how much God loves us. We forget God's promises. We all desire connection with others. We were made for relationship with God and each other, and it is scandalous to consider the depth of God's love for us. That even as we place our faith and trust in God, we do so knowing that we've received love that we don't deserve, grace that we cannot possibly earn, and forgiveness that came because sacrificial love. Rev. Mike Slaughter says, "Most of us have no problem believing in God, but we struggle being secure in God's belief in us."

Hosea offers a powerful picture of God's love – simple and profound. And we can take great comfort in it. When we run, God pursues us. When we live with the consequences of our actions, God surrounds us. When we're at the end and think there's no hope for us, God reminds us that we're not alone. God's love is strong. We can trust it. God's love always wins.

I just had a conversation with a friend who needed to hear this truth in the midst of a difficult situation for those she loves. Maybe you need to hear it today, or maybe you know someone who needs to hear it. God's love doesn't end. Hosea offers hope because God's love is a powerful force. It's ours to receive - and ours to share. It's love that doesn't quit. Love without end. Let us pray...

PRAYERS of the PEOPLE & the LORD'S PRAYER