

Hosea 11:1-11 “God’s Deepest Desire”

For those of you who were here last week, we got to squirm in our seats a little bit as we learned about Hosea ... probably one of the most awkward prophets we’ve studied so far in our series on heroic prophets. I say awkward, because Hosea was told by God to marry Gomer, a prostitute whose name means “dead end.” In addition to being told to marry Gomer, Hosea was also told to have children by her and to give them names like, “No Mercy” and “Not my People.” I’m not sure whether we ever had a satisfactory answer as to *why* God would call Hosea to this kind of life, but it was safe to say that God wanted Hosea at a very human level to experience the same kind of heartbreak that God was experiencing because of Israel’s unfaithfulness.

I’m sure you’d like me to say that we’re moving on from Hosea this week, but that’s not the case. But I *think* this week’s passage might be a little more relatable than what we dealt with last week. If last week’s passage *was* relatable, I know some great marriage and family therapists here in town if you need a referral. Hopefully this week isn’t quite as shocking and awkward as last week. As far as relatability goes, I think parents will connect to this week’s scripture. If you’re *not* a parent, please understand that I’m not trying to exclude you today. But the words and images that the prophet uses here sound very much like a parent who just can’t wait until their children learn to walk and talk, but then they are horrified at what they say and do! I know this feeling all too well. When we lived in Virginia, we caught the edge of a pretty big hurricane that hit the coast. The storm dumped quite a bit of rain on us, took down a lot of branches and blew a lot of debris out in the yard and streets. I was away on a business trip when the storm hit. And before I went on the business trip, I had promised one of my children, who will go unnamed for soon-to-be-obvious reasons, that he and I would go on a big bike ride when I got back. So this child and I were standing in the garage with the door open surveying the storm damage when out of the blue he said, “I’d really like to go on that bike ride today, but it’s just too f***ing muddy.” And there I was, caught in that awkward moment

when my child said something ridiculously inappropriate, and I had to respond. Now ... parents fully understand the inevitability that one day our children will say that word. It *will* happen. And maybe you prepare yourself for this moment too. Maybe you've thought this through and even developed a scenario in your mind of how you'd respond when the day finally came. Maybe you even came up with a little speech that you rehearsed in your mind. Like, "Young man. We do *not* use words like that. That word is crude and inappropriate and should never be spoken out loud in public or private. Go to your room and you stay there until you can come out and use kind words." But on that day when my sweet boy finally uttered that word for the first time, I froze. And there I stood with tears welling up in my eyes. Not because I was sad or hurt or offended, but because I was trying to suppress my laughter. And that little speech that I outlined and rehearsed in my head a dozen times in anticipation of that day? Gone. Right out the window. The only thing that I could manage to get out of my mouth was, "Don't ever let your mom hear you say that word!"

As time passes and your kids get older and more autonomous, they start establishing their own values and morals and ... vocabulary. Sometimes the decisions they make and the paths they choose are different than what you may have envisioned for them. What parent hasn't been wounded by the child who refuses to hold on to what you treasure most? We think, "Is it just me, or does my child somehow know exactly what to say and do to push me to the very edge of my sanity? This child whose every need I've provided for? Who I have comforted and cleaned up after? This child who is as good at breaking my heart as he or she is at filling it with joy? God, as the parent of Israel, seems to be in the same situation here. Back in the 1980s and 90s there was a popular parenting book called, *The Strong Willed Child*. That was Israel. The strong-willed child who knew exactly what buttons to push to send the parent into a tailspin of anger, despair, and frustration.

I was reflecting the other day about not only my experience as a parent, but friends who we've made over the years who have kids too. There's

no such thing as a perfect kid, nor is there a perfect parent. We're all products of a combination of biological and sociological factors. In other words nature and nurture. We pass down genetic characteristics to our children ... some that we're happy to share, and others that we wish we didn't pass on. The traits that we pass on that we may not be happy about are often the things we dislike about ourselves the most. In moments of frustration we may say, "Why is that kid so hard-headed and stubborn?" which may prompt others in our lives to roll their eyes and say, "Yeah ... gee ... where *did* this kid get such a stubborn streak?" What's the old saying? "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

But biology isn't the only thing that shapes us. We are also products of *where* we were raised. We had a lot of missionary kids as classmates at Northwest Christian College. They would often act or speak in a way that was ... different. For example, one young woman would always indicate where something was by pointing her chin. You might say something like, "Hey, do you know where Professor Lane is? I thought I saw him over here a minute ago." And she'd say, "Yes, he went that way." And it wasn't a subtle nod either, it was a laser-precise line between the bottom of her chin and the exact door where she saw the professor leave. Come to find out, she grew up in tribal Kenya where pointing one's finger was considered an obscene gesture. They gave directions using their chins. And if something was particularly far away, they'd stick out their tongues to indicate the extra distance. Her raised-in-America classmates thought this was a little odd, but we accepted her nonetheless. What we underestimated was the culture stress *she* was experiencing. Even though she was among people who looked similar to her, she knew that she wasn't "one of us."

That's how Mary and I felt when we moved from Oregon to Tennessee. We'd go into a supermarket and someone who worked there would ask if we needed a "buggy." We had no idea what they were asking. "A what?" "A buggy." (Blank stare.) Anyone know what a buggy is in the South? A shopping cart. The employee would sigh and say, "You ain't from around here are you?" Our kids experienced this a little when we

moved from Virginia to here. They couldn't understand why kids made fun of them when they'd say, "Yes ma'am" or "no ma'am" to their teachers. Shoot, even the teachers teased them about it. We often forget about how cultural conditioning factors into our behavior or identity.

I think one of the most frustrating things for a parent, though, is despite spending a lot of time and effort modeling the family's values, the kid may choose a path that seems totally opposed to their family's ethics and morals. My parents' generation called it, "Falling in with the wrong crowd." And I'm not talking about little things like the Methodist kid who wants to join the Episcopalians or the son of a toymaker who wants to be a dentist. (And yes, I got that one from Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer.) No, I'm talking about the kid who get sucked up into a culture of crime or substance abuse or who affiliates with a hate group. It's heartbreaking to see parents who, despite their best efforts, can't understand how or why their kid strayed so far away from the family's core values.

That's what this passage of scripture is all about. God is the parent who is caught up in the throes of despair watching Israel make choices that are leading them to destruction. "What happened to the little kid who was so happy go lucky? Who thought mom and dad were the best people on earth? Who was always so grateful and loving and loyal? What went wrong?" For God it was, "What happened to this nation who used to be the prime example of justice, and mercy, and hospitality in the world? Why have they turned away from me in favor of Baal and these Canaanite fertility gods? Why have they become so enamored with the Assyrians and the Egyptians and are making sketchy alliances with them just so they can satisfy their craving for wealth and status?"

It's so hard for a parent to know what to do when your children have strayed so far. Think about how many parents who have kids struggling with substance abuse. I can't tell you how many parents I know who have kids that are so addicted to drugs that they have to keep their valuables hidden or locked away because their kids have stolen from

them to pay for their habit. Parents who have spent thousands of dollars on rehab programs only to have their kids relapse. Parents who have sacrificed their retirement savings on court fines and restitution. The problem is that at some point, the parents have to understand that if they continue to rescue their kids, they put their own health and welfare in danger. They come to the realization that what the flight attendants say before a plane leaves the runway is true: If the cabin pressure drops and the oxygen masks drop down, you need to put the mask on yourself first before you help someone else. A number of support groups for parents struggling with their children's addiction advocate for "tough love." Don't bail the kid out when he or she goes to jail. Don't enable them to continue using by providing them food or shelter. You aren't showing them love by enabling them. You're only setting up unhealthy patterns of codependent behavior. Some parents can't do this. They say, "How is not being there to help showing love to your child? What if their lives are in danger, and I'm not there to pick them up if they fall?" They don't understand that saying, "no" to enabling their kids' addiction does *not* mean, "I don't love you." Once the kid gets his or her life together and starts working their steps and making amends, the loving parent is there to welcome them back much in the same way that the father welcomed the prodigal son back in Jesus' parable.

I wish I could say, "And so God's people heard Hosea's message, heeded God's warning, repented and lived happily ever after." Like Amos, Hosea was active during the last years of King Jeroboam's reign which ended in 746 BC. By 722 BC, King Sargon of Assyria had laid siege to Samaria, the ruling city in Northern Israel, and deported many of the nation's movers and shakers. And you know, I think Hosea knew that King Jeroboam and the nation wouldn't listen to God's message. That didn't stop him from preaching though. When God calls prophets to preach, they often go in knowing that they're only serving as harbingers of the inevitable. But every now and then ... every once in a while, people hear, believe, and return to God, knowing that God will receive them back as a loving parent would receive a prodigal child.