

A LOVE STORY

Hosea 1:2 – 10; 2:14 – 23

Sunday, July 28, 2013

Before we get to Hosea, I want to tell you about my high school girlfriend. When I was in high school, I dated this girl off and on for a couple of years. And you know how it is when you're young. She was *it*. We were in love. We were going to go to the same college, then we would get married and have lots of kids. We were only 14 or 15, but we just knew that we were in love and we were going to spend the rest of our lives together. I thought she hung the moon. I wanted to spend every waking moment with her. I was absolutely devoted to her. I never even *looked* at or *talked* to another girl when we were dating. I had no interest in anyone else. She was *it* for me.

Well, one week during the summer she had to go out of town with her family to visit family in another state. And when she got home, she called me and told me that while she was gone, she had met this other boy. And she kissed him. I was absolutely *devastated*. I had *trusted* this person with my heart, my love, my *self*; I opened myself up and gave myself to her, and she went and totally *betrayed* that trust. I mean, I don't care if you're in high school or if you've been married for 50 years. That *hurts*. I felt like a *fool*; like they were sitting around laughing at my expense. I was embarrassed. I was angry. I was hurt. I broke up with her on the spot. For me, that was the ultimate betrayal.

Anyone who's ever been through that *knows* how awful and gut-wrenching that feeling is. Obviously I got over it and moved on with my life. But at the time, it felt like the *end of my world*. Like I would *never* be able to *love* or *trust* anyone ever again.

That feeling of being cheated on is one of the worst things a person can ever experience. I mean, we spend our lives trying to find someone who we believe will *never* do that to us; someone we can *trust* who will never *betray* that trust. Most people would never *purposefully* give their heart to someone who they *know* is going to betray them and cheat on them. We would never go into a relationship like that on *purpose*, right? Well, meet Hosea...

Because the first thing that God says to Hosea is, “Go marry a prostitute.” Go marry a woman who you *know* is going to cheat on you over and over and over again. And the reason God tells him to *do* this, the reason Hosea has to marry a woman who he *knows* will be unfaithful to him, is because, God says, “The people of Israel have been unfaithful to *me*.” Hosea’s relationship with his *wife* is supposed to mirror *God’s* relationship with the people of Israel.

So Hosea goes and marries a prostitute named Gomer. Hosea and Gomer have three kids together. Or at least Hosea *thinks* they’re his kids. He’s married to a prostitute, so who really *knows* if they’re his kids or not? But he has to *raise* them anyway. So, three kids: a son named Jezreel (which is the name of a place where some pretty bad stuff happened in the history of Israel, so it would be like a Jewish person today naming their child Auschwitz), a daughter named Lo-ruhamah (which is Hebrew for, “Not pitied,” because God says he no longer has pity for the people of Israel), and another son named Lo-ammi (which is Hebrew for, “Not my people,” because, God says, the people of Israel are no longer my people, and I am no longer their God). You thought your kids hated *their* names...

So Hosea’s whole family is meant to reflect the unfaithfulness of the people of Israel. People are supposed to look at Hosea’s family and see something about *God* and about *themselves*. They

are supposed to get this message that *they* have been unfaithful to God, and that they don't even know who their real father is.

That's how things *start off* for Hosea. Three kids with a prostitute. The thing about Gomer, though, is that she doesn't put the career on hold when the kids come. She's a working woman. She's not the stay-at-home-mom type. She sees the benefits of having a two-income family, so she's back out on the street. Night after night, man after man. She is unfaithful to Hosea over and over and over again.

Here's the crazy thing though: Hosea actually falls in *love* with her. And as humiliated and rejected as Hosea must feel, *he doesn't stop loving her*. It's like he can't *help* himself. It's like Emily Dickinson said, "The heart wants what the heart wants."

She's out with a different man every night. But Hosea doesn't stop loving her. He actually devises all these plans to win her back. He showers her with gifts to win her love, but she thinks that these other men have given them to her. He takes her out into the wilderness and speaks tenderly to her, like a romantic picnic where he reads her love poems. But it doesn't work. Hosea can't stop loving Gomer, but she just rejects him at every turn.

After a while things start to unravel for Gomer. Because you can only make a living on your looks for so long. So the prostitution market starts to dry up. And Gomer finds herself in *massive debt*. In ancient Israel, if you wound up so destitute that you couldn't pay your debts, you had a choice; you could sell yourself as a slave, and that money would go to pay off your debt. So Gomer is a destitute prostitute, and that's exactly what she does. She sells herself one more time, this time into slavery.

So they have this big sale where all the slaves are being sold. And Gomer's up there on the stage, waiting for her turn. When who should walk in but Hosea. And everybody's like, "Oh! It's *on* now! All that embarrassment she caused him, all the humiliation, all the times she rejected him...it's *payback* time!" And Hosea makes a *bid* on her. And he *wins*. And everybody's like, "Oh! He *owns* her now! He can treat her however he *wants*. She's his *property*! He can beat her, abuse her, he can *kill* her if he wants. She's going to *regret* all the pain she caused him. She's going to wish she had never been unfaithful to him."

So Gomer, she's got to be thinking all this herself as she starts walking back to her new master. And imagine that: I bet she couldn't even *look* at him. Her eyes are just *fixed* on the floor in shame. She has to be *terrified* of what he's going to *do* to her. She stands in front of him, and he says something absolutely unbelievable to her. He says, "I have bought you, *not* that you should call me *master*, but that you would call me *husband*."

After all that, all the pain, all the humiliation, all the cheating, all the other men, after everything she has put him through, *Hosea still can't stop loving her*. There's no *payback*. There's no *revenge*. There's no *punishment*. There's only *love*.

And remember, this isn't just the story of two people. The whole point here is God saying *through* Hosea to the people of Israel, "This is *me* and *you*. *This* is how I love you. You have been unfaithful to me *over* and *over* and *over* again. You have run off with all these other gods. You have betrayed my trust. You have been nothing more than a *prostitute*. But you know what? *I still love you*. I can't *help* myself. I know I said you're not my people, but *now*, you are children of the living God. You *belong* to *me*, not so you will call me *master*, but so you will

call me *my husband, my love*. There's no *payback*. There's no *revenge*. There's no *punishment*. There's only *love*."

The story of Hosea and Gomer is this weird, twisted, *Pretty Woman* love story that is supposed to *remind us* that the story of God and Israel is a love story. That no matter how unfaithful Israel is, no matter how bad it gets, God will always be there to receive them with love. And here's why this matters for *us*. Because it's not just about Hosea and Gomer. It's not just about God and Israel. It's *also* about God and *us*.

When I was 17 years old, I was arrested for a crime that I did not commit. Wrong place, wrong time, wrong people. I was taken out of school in handcuffs, taken down to the police station, fingerprinted, photographed, all that. It was like, in this moment and in the weeks and months that followed, I saw my whole life falling apart. All the plans, hopes, and dreams that I had were just crumbling to pieces. Because the thing was, no one believed me. No one believed that I didn't *do* this.

So I go to my first court appearance, and as I walk down the hallway to the courtroom, I see the associate pastor from my church standing there. And I was thinking, "What are *you* doing here?" She was just there to support me; to be a friendly face through a terrifying time.

In the week following that court appearance, I went to the church office and talked with her; told her everything that had happened. And this funny thing happened: she *believed* me. Not just *that*, but she believed *in* me. We started getting together to talk weekly. She was there for every single court appearance. And eventually everything got sorted out, the truth came out, and all the charges were dropped. But what happened in the meantime was, I got my first real glimpse

of *grace*. When my life was *broken*, no one *believed* me, no one believed *in* me, *she* loved me and accepted me *just the way I was*. Without that experience, *I would not be here with you today*. She did not just *tell me* that God loved me, she *embodied* that love and acceptance to me.

God is saying to *us* through this story, “This is how I love *you*. No matter how bad it gets; you may make mistakes, you may be unfaithful, you may chase off after all these other things, you may make a total mess out of your life. You may get to the point where you think you deserve nothing but punishment. You may get to the point where you find it impossible to believe I could ever love you at all. But I *do*. Because while you may be unfaithful, I am *always* faithful. I bought you for a price, my very *life*, when I died for you in Jesus. You belong to *me*. But *not* so you will call me *master*. So you will call me *my husband, my love*.”

What Hosea’s story tells us, plain and simple, is that God loves you *no matter what*. No matter how bad you’ve messed up and run away from him. God’s faithfulness is stronger than our bad choices.

So the question is: how much do you *believe* that? Because I think it’s real easy for us to say, “Well, yeah, God loves me. But you don’t know about *this* thing that happened to me.” Doesn’t matter. God loves you even *with* that. “Well, okay, God loves me. But you don’t know about *that* thing that I did. *No one* could love me if they knew about *that*.” Doesn’t matter. God loves you even *with* that. How much do you believe that? How much do you believe that love *covers* in your life? Anything short of *everything* is underestimating God.

It is *really hard* for us to *believe* that, to fully embrace that, that God could love us and accept us no matter what. We’re always wanting to say, “Yeah, *but...*” Hosea shows us that there *is* no,

“Yeah, *but...*” There is only love. God knows you. God knows *all* of that. And God loves you and accepts you anyway. God may want something *different* for you; something *better* for you than what you’re currently allowing yourself to *be* or to *have*. But just because God wants something *better for you* doesn’t mean that God needs something better *from* you in order to love you. God may want something better for your life, but that doesn’t change God’s love for you.

God loves you *no matter what*. It’s such a simple message. It’s the most basic message of our faith. But it is critically important for us to be *reminded* of that over and over again.

Why is something so *basic* so *important*? Because of the number of Christians and churches out there who *speak* and *act* in ways that suggest otherwise. The number of Christians and churches shouting at the top of their lungs that God loves you *if...* *If* you turn it around. *If* you fly right. *If* you follow all the rules and don’t ever make any mistakes. Otherwise, you don’t *deserve* God’s love. You deserve God’s *wrath* and *punishment*. But the whole point of Hosea, the whole point of *Jesus* is, yeah, you *don’t* “deserve” God’s love and acceptance. You’ve done nothing to “earn” it. But it is being poured out upon you *anyway*.

Hosea embodied that message to the people of Israel. My pastor embodied that message to *me*. And as the church of Jesus Christ, it is *our* calling to embody that message to the world. That *we* are called to love *others* that same way. To love the people who have hurt *us* and embarrassed *us* and been unfaithful to *us*. To *accept* those whom everyone deems unacceptable.

There’s this old Nat King Cole song where he sings, “The greatest thing you’ll ever learn is just to love and be loved in return.”

A relationship with God is not about following all the rules and getting everything perfect and never making any mistakes. And it's not about God waiting to *get* you when you *do* make a mistake. This is a love story between you and God. It's the story of us learning to be loved, even with all our mistakes and baggage, *allowing ourselves* to be loved, and to love others in return.