

“HEARTBROKEN FOR THE HEARTLESS”¹

Hosea 1-3

Church of Christ / Plymouth (Michigan)

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The first time GOD spoke to Hosea he said:

“Find a whore and marry her.

Make this whore the mother of your children.

And here’s why: This whole country

has become a whorehouse, unfaithful to me, GOD”

(Hos 1:2, *The Message*).

With this startling and shocking statement, the word of Yahweh is spoken to the eighth-century-B.C. prophet Hosea.

“Whore.” The sound of the word is as ugly as the sense of its meaning. “Whore.” Of all the English words to describe promiscuity or prostitution, perhaps none is as abrasive as the term “whore.”²

The 1990 movie *Pretty Woman* is the story of a transformation from whore to woman, from prostitute to lady. But a story depicting a whore who becomes a wife and mother, and yet remains a whore, is by no means a “pretty” story. Whereas Julia Roberts played the part of the “the pretty woman,” Hosea’s Gomer portrayed the plight of “the pretty whore.” “Whore.” There’s that word again. “Pretty woman” sounds appealing. “Pretty whore” sounds appalling—which brings me to this unsettling and uncomfortable conclusion: *To hear the story of Hosea and not be appalled is to be as apathetic as the audience to whom the tale was first told.*

¹This sermon to be published in the forthcoming (Summer 2004) David Fler and Dave Bland, eds., *Preaching from the 8th-Century Prophets*, Rochester College Sermon Seminar Series, vol. 5 (Abilene: Abilene Christian University, 2004).

²See Craig Bowman’s article in this volume where he maintains that attempts to soften the offensiveness of the Hebrew *z_n_h* and its synonyms “are probably unfaithful to the original meaning of the word given its wide use by Israel’s prophets, especially when their intent was clearly in some cases to arrest the attention of an apathetic wayward people who apparently could not have cared less (e.g., Ezek 16 and 23).”

But the salacious story of Gomer's indiscrete infidelity is not the most scandalous part of Hosea's prophetic preaching. The shocking scandal of Hosea's message is what it says about the nature of God.³ The most scandalous character in the Hosea story is Yahweh! Yahweh's demand that Hosea covenant himself to a whoring woman pales in comparison with Yahweh's decision to covenant Himself to an adulterous nation. *The real scandal of Hosea is that of a heartbroken God who absolutely refuses to stop loving a heartless people.* Such love is as scandalous as it is salvific.

This sermon is a struggle for me. Why? Is it because I must find a tasteful way to tell you the tantalizing tidbits about Gomer's sexual exploits? No, that part is easy. There are no such details. Is it because I must find words to express the anguish and anger of betrayed Hosea? No, that too is not difficult. We know very little about Hosea himself. Is it because I don't want to preach doom and gloom by portraying the sinfulness of Israel? No, most of you watch the News and so you've heard it all and seen it all before. This sermon is a struggle for me because the story itself compels me to speak to you about a God who chooses to reveal Himself in ways that to us seem so completely out of character. *How dare God disclose Himself to us in the disgusting imagery of steadfast love for a heartless whore!* What kind of God rips out His heart and places it before us that we may see both the awesomeness and awfulness of His emotional agony? And although I want to express the power of Hosea, I confess that I do not want to experience the pain of Hosea. But this morning it doesn't matter how I feel. It doesn't matter how you feel. It doesn't even matter how Hosea felt. What matters is, How does God feel?⁴ And so I struggle as I strive to speak to your heart about the heart of Yahweh.⁵

What we need to see is that Yahweh cannot be apathetic. *It is impossible for our God to be indifferent towards us.* This is both soothing and it is scary. In this sermon, we will witness the extreme range and incredible intensity of Yahweh's emotional steadfast love, and we will (hopefully) understand that no matter how unmoved we may be by God's

³See Bowman's article in this volume where he speaks of "the incomprehensible and incomparable nature of a God who loves the unlovable with an illogical loyalty."

⁴"Thus the prophet is guided, not by what he feels, but rather by what God feels" (Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper/Colophon, 1962), 94).

⁵Heart imagery is an important structural and connective thread throughout the Book of Hosea. See 2:14; 4:11; 7:6, 11, 14; 10:2; 11:8; 13:6, 8.

feelings for us, He cannot be unmoved by our lack of feelings for Him. We begin with chapter 2, verses 14-20.⁶ Listen to what Yahweh says to unfaithful Israel.

“And so, in light of all that has happened, I shall woo her [Israel] myself and shall lead her into the wilderness and shall *speak to her heart*. I will return her vineyards to her, transforming the Valley of Trouble into a Gateway of Hope. And she will respond to me as in the days of her youth, as in the days when I freed her from the land of Egypt.

“In that coming day,” says Yahweh, “you will call me ‘my husband’ and will no longer refer to me as ‘my master.’ For I will cause you to forget your images of Baal; even their names will no longer be spoken. At that time, I will make for your sake a covenant with the wild animals, with the birds of the air, and with the critters that scurry on the ground. Bow, sword, and war I will banish from the land so that you can lie down in safety. And I will take you for my wife forever, pledging to you righteousness, justice, loyal-love, and mercy. I will be faithful to you and make you mine, and you will finally know me as Yahweh.”

“I will woo her” . . . “speak to her heart” . . . “take her to be my wife and make her mine forever” . . . Yahweh speaks to Israel the romantic language of courtship and marriage—passionate words spoken to a promiscuous whore. Hollywood has never written a script that can match this!

But there is a problem: Israel is not “woo-able.” Her heart is hard and so her ears are deaf. What is Yahweh to do? How does He feel about a hard-hearted, hard-of-hearing people? We look now to chapter 13, verses 4-8. Yahweh is the speaker.

“Only I, Yahweh, have been your God ever since the land of Egypt. You have never known a [true] God but me, and you have never had a savior other than me. I took care of you in the wilderness, in that land of baking heat. When you were cared for you became satisfied, and when you were satisfied you became haughty, and so you forgot about me. Now then, here is what I am going to do. I will attack you like a lion, or like a leopard that lurks along the road. I will attack you like a mother-bear robbed of her cubs, and will *rip to pieces the enclosure of your heart*. I will devour you like a lion, and will tear you apart like a wild animal.”

Oh my! Can this be the same God of chapter 2? We have gone from the beauty to the beast! We have gone from romancing the heart to ripping out the heart! *How can it be that Yahweh is both Casanova and Hannibal Lecter?!*

What kind of god is Yahweh? . . . He is a god with a heart. And because He has a heart, this creates for Him an emotional dilemma when the people He so desperately

⁶Hebrew—2:16-22. The translation is my own. All biblical texts cited in this sermon are my translations.

loves are so despicably unloving and unlovely. *The real scandal of Hosea is that of a heartbroken God who absolutely refuses to stop loving a heartless people.* From chapter 11, verses 8 and 9, listen not only to the agony of God’s heart, listen to God’s assessment of Himself and to the actions He will undertake because of who He declares Himself to be.

“O Ephraim, how can I give you up? O Israel, how can I hand you over? How can I treat you like Admah or surrender you to the fate of Zeboim? ***My heart is torn within me***; my compassion is aroused. No, I refuse to act in angry wrath and I will not change my mind and destroy Ephraim. For I am God and not a mere mortal. I am the Holy One living among you, and I will not come in fury.”

I am speechless. What can I say? God has already said it all. God declares that because He *is* God, He will *not* do to His people what they deserve to have done to them. (In a future lesson focusing on chapters 4-14, we will see that Yahweh takes Israel to court—He presses charges and the people are found guilty. However, it is Yahweh who appeals the verdict as He cannot bring Himself to carry out the sentence!)

Perhaps some of you are thinking, I wish Royce had spent more time telling us about Hosea and Gomer’s marriage. After all, who names their children “You’re Going to Get It!”⁷—“I Don’t Care What Happens to You!”⁸—“You’re Not My Kid!”⁹ Exactly what type of woman was Gomer? Was she really a whore or is the language only metaphorical? If the language is literal, was her prostitution secular or cultic? Or does it only refer to the loss of virginity in a fertility initiation rite? Was she promiscuous before her marriage or after her marriage or both? What happened after Hosea and Gomer were reunited? (The story ends without an ending!) And what about the language of spousal abuse in chapter 2? The list of questions goes on and on, and they are intriguing questions.¹⁰ But none of them is the question that matters most. The question that matters most is: *How does God feel about us when we no longer feel for Him?* The answer: He still loves us. And what makes that love so scandalous is the fact that we are such scoundrels. To borrow from the seventeenth-century-A.D. French mathematician and

⁷Jezreel (Hos 1:4-5, 11; 2:21-23a).

⁸Lo-ruhamah (Hos 1:6-7; 2:23b).

⁹Lo-ammi (Hos 1:8-9, 10: 2:23c).

¹⁰See Bowman’s article in this volume and Craig D. Bowman, “Prophetic Grief, Divine Grace: The Marriage of Hosea,” *Restoration Quarterly* 43:4 (2001): 229-42.

Christian philosopher Blaise Pascal, “The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing.”¹¹ Hosea is the story of a never-ending love for a no-good people—a love that is incomprehensible, incomparable, and illogical. It makes no sense that God should love such a senseless people.

Our contemporary culture has at least one thing in common with eighth-century-B.C. Israel: *It is difficult for us to hear the message of Hosea because we believe ourselves to be spiritual.* After all, we are “one nation under God” and “in God we trust.” It is inconceivable to us that we would be portrayed as Gomer. Modern-day-self-serving spirituality is far more palatable and pleasing than the thought of serving a sovereign, saving, scandalous God. But that doesn’t change who God is, nor does it change what that makes us to be. And, by the way, lest we miss the point and leave this morning thinking only of God’s displeasure with the outside world, remember that Hosea did not preach to the Ancient Near Eastern World; he prophesied to Israel, to those who claimed to be the people of Yahweh. It is so much easier for us to pronounce that God is distraught with this wicked world than it is for us to perceive when He is disgusted with His worthless church.

How does God feel about the Plymouth Church of Christ? Perhaps we can best answer with another question. How would *you* feel if your spouse treated *you* like *you* treat God? How would *you* feel if your spouse honored, respected, and loved *you* in the same way *you* honor, respect, and love God? How would *you* feel? Maybe we should all go home, watch football, and not think about such questions. That’s what Gomer would do. . . .

Calvin Miller has written a trilogy of books in which he retells the story of the New Testament in a poetic and metaphorical way. The first book, *The Singer*, is the story of the Gospels. Jesus is the Singer and His song is the good news of God’s redeeming love. Of course, Jesus has competition. Satan, called the World Hater, also sings his song. His

¹¹Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (New York: Penguin Books, 1966), 154, no. 423. Interestingly, this oft-quoted statement of Pascal occurs in the context of how God is known by humans. Pascal goes on to maintain, “It is the heart which perceives God and not the reason. That is what faith is: God perceived by the heart, not by the reason” (154, no. 424). Although Hosea may not have a similar negative assessment of reason, he does proclaim that “the knowledge of God” is a matter of the heart and not merely a matter of the head. See Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper/Colophon, 1962), 57-60.

song is seductive and deceptive—it appears to be a love song but it is really a song of hate. The excerpt I am going to read to you concerns Jesus meeting a woman who is engaged in the business of selling herself. Like Gomer, she is a whore. Listen as I read.

He met a woman in the street. She leaned against an open door and sang through her half-parted lips a song that he could barely hear. He knew her friendship was for hire. She was without a doubt a study in desire. Her hair fell free around her shoulders. And intrigue played upon her lips.

“Are you betrothed?” she asked.

“No, only loved,” he answered.

“And do you pay for love?”

“No, but I owe it everything.”

“You are alone. Could I sell you but an hour of friendship?”

Deaf to her surface proposition, he said, “Tell me of the song that you were singing as I came upon you. Where did you learn it?”

His question troubled her. At length she said, “The first night that I ever sold myself, I learned it from a tall impressive man.”

“And did he play a silver pipe?” the Singer asked.

She seemed surprised. “Do you know the man who bought me first?”

“Yes. Not long ago, in fact, he did his best to teach that song to me.”

“I cannot understand. I sell friendship and you your melody. Why would he teach us both the self-same song?”

The Singer pitied her. He knew the World Hater had a way of making every victim feel as though he were the only person who could sing his song.

“He only has one song; he therefore teaches it to everyone. It is a song of hate.”

“No, it is a love song. The first night that he held me close, he sang it tenderly and so in every way he owned me while he sang to me of love.”

“And have you seen him since?”

“No, not him, but a never ending queue of men with his desires.”

“So it was no song of love. Tell me, did he also say that some day in the merchandising of your soul, you would find someone who would not simply leave his fee upon the stand but rather take you home to care for you and cherish you?”

Again she seemed surprised, “Those were indeed his very words—how can you know them?”

“And have you found the one that he has promised?”

“Not yet.”

“And how long have you peddled friendship?”

“Some twenty years are gone since first I learned the song that you inquired about.”

The Singer felt a burst of pity. “We sometimes give ourselves to hate in masquerade and only think it love. And all our lives we sing the song we thought was right. The Canyon of the Damned is filled with singers who thought they knew a love song . . . Listen while I sing for you a song of love.”

He began the melody so vital to the dying men around him. “In the beginning was the song of love . . .”

She listened and knew for the first time she was hearing all of love there was. Her eyes swam when he was finished. She sobbed and sobbed in shame. “Forgive me, Father-Spirit, for I am sinful and undone . . . for singing weary years of all the wrong words . . .”

The Singer touched her shoulder and told her of the joy that lay ahead if she could learn the music he had sung.

He left her in the street and walked away, and as he left he heard her singing his new song. And when he turned to wave the final time he saw her shaking her head to a friendship buyer. She would not take his money.

And from his little distance, the Singer heard her use his very words.

“Are you betrothed?” the buyer asked her.

“No, only loved,” she answered.

“And do you pay for love?”

“No, but I owe it everything.”¹²

In just a few minutes from now, we will all leave this place of worship. As we each walk out the door, we will either walk away from God’s love or we will walk in God’s love. We will depart to live as if God’s love means nothing to us or to live as if we owe everything to God’s love. How do you feel about God? More importantly, *How does God feel about you?*

¹²Calvin Miller, *The Singer* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1975), 62-66.