

Scriptures: Luke 12:13-21; Hosea 11:1-11

A Dysfunctional Family

The Old Testament prophets have a tendency of telling God's people some uncomfortable truths. The last few weeks we've looked at a couple of the minor prophets – Amos, and Hosea, and we're going to spend this week with Hosea again. Last week we talked about the rough home life Hosea had. It truly was dysfunctional. God told him to marry a woman named Gomer, even though God knew the kind of woman she was.

At one point, Hosea actually had to go buy his wife – so he could bring her back home! God knows how unfaithful Gomer will be, and He knows just how loving Hosea will be in return – despite the fact that Gomer does nothing to deserve her husband's love. And that's the big take-away of the story. Their relationship, injured and stained by unfaithfulness, is the living illustration of what's wrong between God and His people. Despite God's steadfast love and care, Israel had gone looking for other gods. If you have your Bible with you, or a Bible app handy, turn with me to Hosea 11:1-11. I'll be reading from the New International Version today. **Read Hosea 11:1-11.**

Last week we talked about the power of words. Specifically, the power behind the names God was telling Hosea to name the children born to Gomer. Words are powerful. The things we say make an impact on those who hear it. You parents, and grandparents, out there – pay attention this morning – to the things you say, and how you say them to your kids and grand-kids. That includes me – this sermon is a word to me. Most, if not all, of the sermons I've preached to you here these last two years have been very timely in my own life, today's is no exception!

God Gives Freedom

I need to be more thoughtful of what I say, and how I say them, especially to Kendra and the girls. Our words can draw people in – they can also push them away. Our language – including how we say what we say, like tone, facial expressions, and so forth – can and do affect the person on the receiving end of it. Look what God says to Hosea in our passage today. “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son,” (Hos. 11:1).

God's speaking figuratively about the nation of Israel here. He called Israel out of Egypt. He brought them up out of slavery – where they had been enslaved four hundred years. He carried them across the Red Sea. I read an article this week, where archaeologists have found old chariot wheels out in the middle of the Red Sea. The things recorded in the Bible really happened, friends! We can take it to the bank.

God gives us – He gave the Israelites – great freedom. He frees them from slavery to Pharaoh, and how do they repay Him? Moses went up on the mountain, and the people get his brother, Aaron, to make them a golden calf to worship. That’s how they repaid God. It’s very sad!

God is a Good Father

“But the more I called Israel, the further they went from Me. They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images,” God says in verse 2. Last week I touched on a piece of what the pagan neighbors of the Israelites did as part of their idol worship. It was, and still is, detestable. I mentioned about offering human sacrifices on their altars. That’s the limit of what I’ll speak to their doing in a worship service with kids present. Friends, the human sacrifices, while bad, was only the tip of the iceberg. There are a lot worse things they did.

God goes on in our text, talking about some of the things He had done, using the image of a father-son relationship. “It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realize it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love; I lifted the yoke from their neck and bent down to feed them,” (verses 3-4). While they wandered in the wilderness for forty years, God provided manna – bread from heaven – on a near daily basis for them to eat. Time and time again, they turned their back on God. Despite their unfaithfulness, He remained faithful. God is a good Father!

If you’ve ever had a wayward child – or as Jesus describes it, a prodigal son – you know exactly what God means. You imagine the places your child may be walking into – places you’d never go. Doing things you’d never do. And in your mind’s eye, you can still see them learning to walk, the lack of confidence, grabbing onto your hands like their life depended on it, and celebrating with them on this seemingly major accomplishment.

They’re Loved and Welcome

Now our prodigal children – and I believe there are those watching on Facebook today, or maybe even here in-person who are also prodigals – they’re walking into strange, unfamiliar places. Perhaps finding comfort in the arms of people who couldn’t care less about them. I know the heartache of having prodigal children. I often wonder if they ever tune in to watch us on Facebook. I hope they know they’re loved, and that they are welcome here anytime!

I say that, because I think that we become so comfortable in sharing those things that weigh on us within church – especially in regards to the relationships in our lives – that we don’t consider the impact of our words on people. There are things Kayleigh and Hunter did when they were younger, that as adults I’m certain they see the

wrongness of. At the time, as their parent, I also mishandled the situation. That said, I don't get into the specifics, because I want there to be a pathway back to restoration.

Kendra and I took the girls, and some friends of ours earlier this month up to the Port Clinton, Lakeside-Marblehead area. It was a nice mini-vacation. We spent a day out on South Bass Island, cruising around Put-in-Bay on a golf cart. On one of the main streets up there, they have an Episcopal church, and right across the street is a Roman Catholic Church, "Our Lady of Sorrows". I'm assuming they named it after Mary, Jesus' mom.

"Woe Is Me"

We've become so accustomed to people putting their whole life story out on social media or on television, that we wrongly assume that's what we're supposed to do, or how we're supposed to be. I look at the Facebook feed, and shake my head. People air a lot of dirty laundry out there, and it's all "high drama" stuff. "Woe is me," sort of stuff, and it's in an effort to make someone else look bad. We need to do less talking, less telling of our woes and sorrows, especially if it's going to cause harm to another person, or put up a roadblock in their pathway to get here. Instead, we need to be better listeners and doers of the Word!

God tells us, "Will they not return to Egypt and will not Assyria rule over them because they refuse to repent? Swords will flash in their cities, will destroy the bars of their gates and put an end to their plans," (verses 5-6). The Israelites weren't literally going to go back to Egypt – they were going to be carried into exile in Assyria – but what God was telling them here, is that they were going to be returned to the status of slaves. That would be a tough pill to swallow – having freedom from slavery for a few hundred years, only to be made slaves again by another country. Notice the reason for it – He tells them, it's "because they refuse to repent."

They're so set in their ways, they aren't going to change, even to God telling them to straighten up! God says, "My people are determined to turn from Me. Even if they call to the Most High, He will by no means exalt them," (verse 7). Even if they call to Him in their misery and distress, He's not going to give them what they want. There's an interesting shift that takes place in our passage, around verse 7.

God Repents?

In researching the passage this week, some theologians even go so far as to say God repents – as though He needs to! He's perfect – He's holy and righteous. Friends, He doesn't need to repent, it's we the people, who need to do that! He says, "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I treat you like Admah? How can I make you like Zeboiim? My heart is changed within Me; all My compassion is aroused," (verse 8).

I think they hear that God's heart is changed, and they make the assumption that He repents. One thing we have to keep in mind is the Old Testament Law. Back in Leviticus, if you had a prodigal child, you had the right to take them out to the edge of town and stone them to death. They could do the same thing to an adulterous woman. We see that played out in the Gospel record where Jesus says, "Let the sinless among you cast the first stone," remember that? It's in John 8.

So God's not willing to stone – to kill – Ephraim, which is a figurative name used for the northern kingdom of Israel. Those other places listed, Admah and Zeboiim, they were two cities located near the Dead Sea. On the day when God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, the neighboring towns of Admah and Zeboiim were also destroyed. God's holy and righteous anger is tempered by His compassion!

He goes on, saying, "I will not carry out My fierce anger, nor will I turn and devastate Ephraim. For I am God, and not man – the Holy One among you. I will not come in wrath," (verse 9). The nation of Israel, personified as a son, was unreliable, but God remained faithful in loving him. In other words, God was saying Israel had messed up, and would be punished, but not destroyed. Some of you, like me, are parents. There are times when your kid does something wrong, so you swat them across the bottom.

Attitude Adjustment

You give them a tune up – an attitude adjustment – and get their attention. I'm a firm believer in spanking, as long as the parents do it responsibly and consistently. Now I say that, but please don't misunderstand me – if you're leaving bruises or breaking bones, you ought not do it – that's abuse. God's giving His son, in this case the nation of Israel, a swat across the bottom to get his attention. That's what this boils down to.

Notice the promise God makes to His people in verses 10 and 11. He says, "They will follow the Lord; He will roar like a lion. When He roars, His children will come trembling from the west. They will come trembling like birds from Egypt, like doves from Assyria. I will settle them in their homes." The lion roar is a call to come home. Those held in slavery and in exile would return swiftly.

And Hosea appears to get a happy ending. God renames Hosea's children, and in chapter 3, Hosea goes and gets his wife, and brings her home permanently. A curse becomes a blessing, and a dead relationship becomes alive again. Are you beginning to notice something here? Do you get the impression that this isn't the last time that God will show mercy to His people?

God Saves

Picture in your mind's eye that day long ago, when three crosses stood against a bleak Middle Eastern sky. Think about the one in the center – the one that holds a carpenter-turned-teacher from Nazareth named Jesus. He has something in common with Hosea's kids – God chose His name as well. It means "God Saves." God no longer promises vengeance to us because of our sins. He isn't going to need to change His mind ever again to save His people.

And because He died on the cross on Good Friday, we're are given new names as well – as His beloved children! Friends, we've covered a lot of things today. There are two big take-aways I want to make sure you hear. First, our words are powerful. The things we say and do impact people. We can impact them for good, or for ill.

The second is related to the first. What we think to ourselves – we call that "self-talk," impacts our outlook. We can be a bunch of negative Nellies and Neds, and bemoan and pour out our sorrows and stay stuck in the focusing on those. Or we can be a bunch of positive Pattys and Petes, and focus on all the great things we see God doing in the world around us. He is present, and active today, friends! He loves and corrects, and encourages us! And even in the valleys of life, He gives us inner joy and peace! I'll also tell you this, after the Resurrection of our Savior on Easter morning, "Our Lady of Sorrows" jumped for joy!

Prayer: Generous God, in abundance You give us things both spiritual and physical. Help us to hold lightly to the fading things of this earth, and to grasp tightly the lasting things of Your kingdom, so that what we are and do and say may be our gifts to You through Christ, who beckons all to seek the things above, where He lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit. Amen.