

Can You Give Me Another Hint?

Hosea 1:1-9

Dr. John Crosby, Christ Presbyterian Church, Edina, Minnesota

Sunday, August 6, 2006

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

We are doing a series of sermons this summer about people that you have never heard of, from stories that you may not know out of the Bible. We're talking about how God uses the small as well as the great. I have waited nineteen years and one month to preach this sermon. I can remember exactly where I was when I thought, 'I've got to preach this sermon.'

In August 1981 I was finishing my seminary training; in the Presbyterian system you are brought before the presbytery, which is a group of pastors and elders representing all the local churches. In the Twin Cities there are about 75 churches, and in the place in Colorado where I was at the time, about sixty churches. They examined the different candidates for ordination to see how well they had been trained, the clarity of their calling, and their grasp of theology. You come usually three times before a small committee, or because this Presbytery took it very seriously, in front of the whole group just like this congregation, and each time the questioning is more serious. This was my third time in front of this group, and I was second up. A young man from Princeton was up front being grilled with questions like: "Young man, would you please quote Second Hesitations 4:18 in the original Hebrew. And tell me what it means." Listening, you just melt.

Sure enough, this guy had answered three or four questions very well, a brilliant young man, and I was already getting sweaty palms because it was just about my turn to go up. Then an old gentleman in the back got up and said "Young man, I serve in a country church and I bet that's where you are going to start your ministry, like I am finishing it. Would you tell me, please, how does the theology of Hosea affect your ministry?" I could just see this guy's face turn white as both he up in the front, and I are going "Hosea, Hosea". I know that name. Hosea. Unlike him, I've got my Bible. It's in here somewhere, and I was racing to find it. Just like a good student, he starts parroting, telling everything he knows about Hosea. "Hosea was a middle prophet, the first of what we call the minor prophets. Now you probably know, sir, that they called them the minor prophets just because their prophesies were shorter, right?" He's stalling. "He lived at the same time that Isaiah and Amos and Micah did and he lived up north. There was a civil war and Israel split in two, so Hosea's up in the north with the other ten tribes and I think he... sir, can you give me a hint?" The gentleman goes "certainly young man. Gomer." Well, that cleared it all up right there, didn't it? Thanks. But the young man goes "oh yeah, yeah, Gomer. Hosea and Gomer were married - that's right, it's a love story. Right?" And the old gentleman says, "would you like another hint?"

By now, I am already looking at careers in accounting... I realized that I had known basically the same list of facts that the young man did about Hosea and he didn't have a clue as to why it was in the Bible. The man said one more line, and I listened to that hint. I went home and I read the Book of Hosea. And I realized that it was something that I needed to hear, and, God willing, that it is something that you need to hear. Let's pray.

Lord, this story is almost 3,000 years old. Somehow the gift of your grace is apparent that it still speaks to our hearts today. We don't know who Hosea and Gomer are yet, and their sons Jezreel and Lo-Ammi, they are just weird names to us. But if you would speak we might learn about this love story in our lives. Amen. It is a love story. It begins with a wedding. Often in the Bible, marriage is a symbol of the relationship between God and His people. Let me tell you the story, but instead of saying "Hosea", I am going to say "Joe", because that's what Hosea's name means. Joe was a young government consultant in religious affairs who developed policy decisions and talked to the king about what God's interests might be. He was in that northern region of Israel for about forty years working for four different administrations in his long career. At the very beginning, when he was starting his government service, times were good. This civil war that I talked about was over and the super powers around little Israel were quiet, occupied with a cold war that was leaving Israel ignored for a while. But the leaders of Israel were evil. They didn't keep

faith with God. As always, when the leaders go bad, it affects the people. People started to live for the day. They got sucked down into the same moral decay that infected their neighbors who didn't believe in the God of Israel. There were good people and bad people living side by side, and the culture started to sink into decline. Does that remind you of anybody else? They forgot the God who brought them to the Promised Land. They went chasing after the American Dream - I mean the Israeli Dream- of health and wealth and happiness and just a little bit more. They forgot the poor, and you could buy justice.

So in the middle of all this Joe was glad to get married, because being a bachelor in his day was not only a drag, but for a religious type it was seen as almost a sin. His fiancée's name was Gomer. It's a weird name. I think the girls called her Gomer because they were jealous. She was a beautiful woman, much like the beautiful nation of Israel. In the middle of the night Joe, the bachelor, had a dream. God told Joe that Israel couldn't serve Him just like many gods, like some magic potion that you use when you need it to keep the kids in line, or to keep the disease away, or to get in the crops. Israel had been sowing bad seed, and now they were going to reap the whirlwind. That phrase come from the Book of Hosea. They were going to reap the whirlwind. God commanded Joe to marry Gomer. God said, even before the wedding, this will not turn out well. There are couples that we marry and you look and know this will not turn out well. You pray and counsel, and sometimes, lately, frankly, I say no. But they got married. Like most young couples, their life was filled with their glands, and the promises of what would come ahead. You hope that it will turn out great, but it didn't.

For some reason Gomer wasn't satisfied with Joe. She liked nice things he couldn't give her. He was a part-time farmer, a consultant going nowhere, so Gomer started to sleep around. And then Gomer and Joe had a child. The child's name was Jezreel. Today God would tell Joe to call him My Lai, or Rwanda, or maybe Auschwitz, some really cheery name that shows what happens, what goes wrong when God's people go wrong. The next two children, Lo-Ruhhamah and Lo-Ammi weren't even his children, probably, and they were named Faithless, and Forgotten by God. Gomer finally ends up moving out altogether, and who takes the kids is not told. The neighbors all assume that it's another case for the divorce courts.

This sounds more and more like today, but then comes the wildest thing. That same voice talks to Joe again in the middle of the night and says "Joe, go get your wife." And Joe says "she's gone". "Go get your wife!" "You know who she ran away with, God, she's not even living with him anymore, now she's just a hooker on the streets, I don't even want to bring her home, the kids, what will they say? What will the neighbors say? She'll just run away again." "Joe, go get your wife."

So Joe goes out into the square where the prostitutes gather, often surrounded by their pimps - it's not a good story is it? It's not a good story at all. Actually, Joe would have to pay Gomer's pimp. It says in the story he didn't even have enough money. He had about fifteen shekels and the guy wanted thirty for run-down Gomer, so he had to go and take a mortgage out on half his barley crop. It took everything he had. Standing in front of his broken-down wife, Joe told her "Hey look, no more running around. We've got a lot of work to do in this marriage, and you are going to need to learn to love me, let's go home." I bet that those were the best words Gomer heard in her entire life - let's go home. We are going to have to start all over - let's take a new name, and let's call the kids different. You know that faithless kid? We'll call her Faith. And that little boy that's a sign that you betrayed me? Let's call him Grace. Let's start all over.

I would like to be able to say "and they lived happily ever after." But we don't know that part of the story. We just know that once there was a guy who loved a woman so much that he went out in the middle of the street and bought her again and brought her home. And that's the story of Hosea. Wouldn't you love to be loved like that? Wouldn't you like it if, no matter what you did, no matter where you went, no matter what happened, he would come up to you and say "let's go home". That's the story of Hosea. What does a story like that teach us? What does it teach this stupid young pastor about Joe's God, and about Joe? About Gomer. I think there's a lot of Gomer in all of us, and maybe there's a little Joe in you today.

Hosea is the Old Testament's answer to the story of the prodigal son, the most famous story in the New Testament. "And when he came to his senses he turned around", and God came to him. But the story of Hosea is even better. Gomer runs away, and God goes after her. God spends everything, because God will not let us go. It's an eternal triangle. You've heard about love triangles? Well, in this story it's the faithful God and the sometimes faithful, sometimes unfaithful believer, and the world that† keeps going "come

here, come here, I've got a better deal, come here." And the Bible says all of us go there sometime. But some of us actually end up living in that triangle, and it becomes the Bermuda Triangle, where souls go and are never seen again.

If I were going to preach about this text, if I were going to learn what this really means, I would say that this is a story that God is not up there wringing his hands going "what do I do now, they've run off." God makes very clear that sin is sin, and it has consequences that are for now and eternal. For now the only consequence you may see is a hardening of heart. But eternally it will lead to judgment and separation from the God who loves you. God is not up there going "oh, what do I do now." Or, "it's ok, whatever you want to do."

Hosea teaches that when we sin, it is not a small deal to God. To God, sin is like a woman who walks out and sees her husband in a bar with somebody else. Or a guy who walks down the street and sees his wife kissing another man. That's what sin is. If I were going to preach about this I would say that it shows me that there are consequences. But it also shows me that it can happen to any one of us. It's easy to pick on Gomer and say that she becomes a hooker. I (finally) graduated, married, and we had a tremendous youth ministry in Chicago. Laura and I were out with another couple in ministry, best friends in college, and Gordy turns to me and says "did you hear about Gordon McDonald?" I said "no what?" He had been my hero in seminary - my mentor/ hero, and had then become the president of Inter-varsity Fellowship. And he said "He's got zipper disease." And I knew exactly what he meant. And my wife and his wife look at each other and my wife started to cry. And she turned to me and said "if it can happen to Gordon McDonald, it can happen to you." That is not to excuse infidelity, because we don't have to sin. It's the kind of people I am. If God is right, it's the kind of people you are. And that's what Hosea talks about, people who walk away and suffer the consequences.

If I were going to preach this sometime, I would talk about how we are bought with a price. Hosea had to sell his field and go into debt. The story of sin ends with grace that comes with a price, and the price that we have seen paid is right there on the cross- that's how much it cost. God is willing to pay over and over. And if I were ever going to preach on this text, I would say that the story of Gomer and Hosea is the story of how God takes used goods and gives them new names. Polishes us up on the outside, but more important, gives a new heart and lets us begin again. My wife, Laura, has a friend Sarah. Just like me, she had never heard of Hosea, but she was at a Bible church one time in Texas, when they preached this story of Hosea, and she burst into tears. She told Laura later that she hadn't told anybody, but she had been having an affair. She couldn't break it off, and she was ashamed to be sitting in a pew, but that she felt at the end that the love of God would not let her go, and she walked out of the sanctuary and she broke off the relationship. She fell to her knees and she said "Please, God, give me a new name."

If I were going to preach about Hosea I would say that it teaches us about real love. Chapter 4, verse 1, uses the word "love" four times. It says that Hosea loves, and Israel loves, and Gomer loves, and God loves. It makes me realize there's love and then there's LOVE. You love chocolate, you love French fries, you love the Vikings, (you're not too bright), and we say we love God. We use that same word for all those things. But the love of Hosea's God is the love that will not let go. God will hold on for all of my life. God's heart is broken, and God's law is broken, but God's love holds on. That was the old preacher's last hint: "Son, when you preach this have them sing 'O Love That Will Not Let Me Go.'" So if I were going to preach this sometime I'd probably end by turning to you and asking you to raise your hand. I'd ask you how many of you feel like Gomer today. You want to be a good wife. You want to be a good husband. You want to be a good son, you want to be a good worker, you want to be a good Christian. There is some evidence in the text that Gomer goes out there so she can get the good life instead of staying home.

How many of you are like Gomer? Do you want to live in both worlds? Hosea says, "you know who the worst ones are? The worst ones are the ones who sit in church on Sunday and go out and act just like everybody else."

I wonder how many of you feel like you're Gomer at the end of the story. Like you've gone so far away from God that you're ruined. And that there is a part of you that is still so ashamed that it's hard to turn back. You want to. But if somebody really knew who you were they wouldn't love you.

How many of you are like Joe, like Hosea? You are good people. You're the religious people who do the right things and get hurt for it, and yet, you have to forgive again and again and again. Who are you this morning?

Hosea shows you, whoever you are this morning, a Love that Will not Let YOU go. That's our God. Remember that the image of the church that Jesus Christ marries, is the bride of Christ. Jesus Christ goes out and finds Himself a Gomer, who looks just like you, and just like me. Thank God! Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, some of us sit here and we think "sounds good, but you just don't know. I've got my church life, and I've got my real life." Some of us sit here, Jesus, and we go "sounds good, but you just don't know what I've done. I can't get back". We ask you, the God who had Hosea marry a woman who becomes a prostitute, who sent Jesus Christ to die for us, we ask you to help those folks come home. Some of us, maybe even most of us, sit here and say "sounds good" but how can I forgive THAT? Jesus we ask you to show us how to love like Hosea, we ask your forgiveness and we ask you to bring us home. We thank you for your mercy, and we ask for the strength to share it with others. In the name of Jesus. Amen.