

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 12, Year C

July 27, 2025

St. Paul's, Cleveland Heights, OH

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+In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen

When the LORD began to speak through Hosea, the LORD said to him, “Go, marry a promiscuous woman and have children with her, for like an adulterous wife this land is guilty of unfaithfulness to the LORD.” Hosea 1:2

When your grandmother told you that the Bible was a dirty old book, she might have had our first lesson today in mind. Because the first lesson tells the story of how God told Hosea to marry a floozy and then have children with her. What kind of a God asks a person to this kind of thing? And why is this story in the Bible at all? On this late July Sunday, I'm going to do my best to provide an explanation.

One of the statements that's often made is that the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament are very different from one another. The way the difference is described is that the God of the Old Testament is the God of wrath, while the God of the New Testament is the God of love. There's nothing new about this assertion. As early as the early second century, a theologian named Marcion preached that God had sent Jesus Christ who was an entirely new god, distinct from the vengeful God of Israel.

The Early Church Fathers denounced Marcion as a heretic, and he was excommunicated by the church. But the belief that the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament are different gods has persisted.

One can see why people might think this way, especially during these last few weeks when the Old Testament lessons have been taken from the Hebrew prophets. When these men were called to preach to the people of Israel, their words were often harsh. They seemed to be speaking on behalf of a God who's preoccupied with justice and retribution rather than a God who's geared toward forgiveness and reconciliation. Because of this, we come away from our encounters with these prophets thinking that the God of the Old Testament has an anger management problem!

This morning, we meet yet another prophet – a man named Hosea who, like the prophet Amos before him, preached to the people of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the eighth century BC.

Like Amos, Hosea was a prophet of doom. But unlike Amos, who described the Day of the Lord as a Day of utter darkness, Hosea balanced his doomsaying with the promise of restoration and renewal. It wasn't that the situation in Israel had gotten any better. Nothing had changed from Amos' time. The moral and religious situation was still terrible. But even though

things seemed hopeless, Hosea told the people that the sun was still shining behind the dark clouds.

So, although Hosea had plenty to say about the sins and wrongdoings of the Israelites, his message in the end was optimistic. Why? It was because of his experience in his marriage. Hosea believed in God's steadfast love. God's steadfast love was the reason to be hopeful.

The strange story of Hosea's marriage to his wife, Gomer, must have left you wondering what this story could possibly be about? What is the meaning of God's telling Hosea, "Go, marry a promiscuous woman and have children with her..." To answer these questions, it's helpful to know a bit about how the prophets communicated.

The prophets frequently used actions to get their point across. They illustrated their messages with unusual actions that served as visual aids for their audiences. In Hosea's case, one prophetic action was to give his children names – names with deep and symbolic meaning – Jezreel and Lo-Ruhamah and Lo-Ammi.

Another was for Hosea to marry Gomer, a woman who would be unfaithful to him, a woman God ordered him to marry and to bear his children. After Hosea has the chance to reflect on what Israel's relationship with God was like, the meaning of his own marriage became stunningly clear: "like an adulterous wife this land is guilty of unfaithfulness to the LORD." Israel had been unfaithful to God in the same way that Hosea's wife had been unfaithful to him.

Hosea was the first prophet to understand the relationship between God and Israel as a marriage. The concept of sacred marriage between various gods and their followers was well-known at the time. The Canaanites, who lived in the land before the Hebrew people invaded, had their own versions of this.

Their religious practices recreated the loves and marriages of their different gods and goddesses. By reenacting the marital relationships of the Gods, people believed that powers were released that helped their crops grow. Without getting too explicit about what went on in their temples, these various marriages between the Gods were acted out by worshippers with temple prostitutes. You can see why the Canaanite religion was so attractive to the Israelites!

Hosea took this idea of the sacred marriage between a god and a nation, and he completely reinterpreted it. Instead of talking about a divine marriage in terms of the cycles of nature – of the agricultural rhythms of sowing and reaping – he spoke of the historical marriage that had been made in the Sinai Desert during the wilderness wanderings between God and the people of Israel. And the brokenness of this marriage – this covenantal relationship between God and Israel – was disclosed to him by a deep understanding of his own relationship with his wife, Gomer.

Just as Gomer had been unfaithful, so Israel had been unfaithful by chasing after other gods. The "wife" whom God had chosen and betrothed – that is, Israel – had become promiscuous, with Israel chasing after other gods.

Like the other prophets, Hosea criticized Israel's society for its social immorality, its political confusion, and its religious observances that had little relationship to the way people lived their lives.

But Hosea went deeper. He was concerned with human motives, with what people set their hearts on, with where people put their trust. And when Hosea examined these things, he saw that the people had gone astray, just as his wife had gone astray. He was heartbroken by what had happened to God's "marriage" to Israel just as he was heartbroken by what had happened in his own marriage to Gomer.

And yet, Hosea did not give up on his marriage nor, he believed, had God given up on his "marriage" to Israel. Hosea's own steadfastness was a symbol – a symbol of God's steadfast love for Israel – a love that passes all human understanding. God's steadfast love gave Hosea reason to hope in what were soon to become some of the darkest days in the history of God's people. The people may have gone astray and suffered the consequences of their unfaithfulness, but Hosea believed that God would never give up on them.

All this happened a long, long time ago, so what does it mean for us today?

The question it raises is this: "what or whom do we worship?" We may be a long way removed from the Canaanite fertility cults with their seductive appeal drawing us from one true God. But to think that there aren't other "gods" that have the potential to lead us astray – that we find every bit as compelling and enticing – is to delude ourselves. What do I mean when I speak of these "other gods"? Let me tell you the story about a famous graduation speech.

Back in 2005, the late David Foster Wallace gave the commencement address at Kenyon College in Gambier. The title of his address was "This is water," and it is considered by many to be one of the finest commencement addresses ever delivered. "This is water" is readily available online for anyone to read, and it's also been published in a book by the same name. I saw the book for sale during the Reading Camp Book Fair.

Like most commencement addresses, David Foster Wallace's is about more than just one thing, but I want to focus on a single point he made. About two-thirds of the way through his speech, Wallace talked about what we worship. The way he related what we worship to the value of a real education is that a real education gives us the ability to decide what has meaning and what doesn't. In other words, he said, we get to decide what we worship.

Here's David Foster Wallace in his own words: "in the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship . . . is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive.

"If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough. It's the truth. Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a

million deaths before they finally grieve you. On one level, we all know this stuff already. It's been codified as myths, proverbs, clichés, epigrams, parables; the skeleton of every great story. The whole trick is keeping the truth up front in daily consciousness.

Wallace continued: "Worship power, you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. But the insidious thing about these forms of worship is not that they're evil or sinful, it's that they're unconscious. They are default settings. They're the kind of worship you just gradually slip into, day after day, getting more and more selective about what you see and how you measure value without ever being fully aware that that's what you're doing."

As a priest of the church, I have a definite point of view about "what sort of god or spiritual-type thing" we should worship. I'm a spiritual descendant of Hosea. I choose to worship the God who continually frees people from bondage, who is revealed in the deep compassion of Jesus, and whose steadfast love will never let us go no matter how unfaithful we may be. This is the God who makes it possible to hope when we face the darkest moments in our lives and the darkest times in our world.

As David Foster Wallace put it, "pretty much anything else [we] worship will eat [us] alive." God knows this, and so it is that God seeks us out again and again, longing to bring us back and give us a fresh start again and again.

What do you worship? Is it something that will eat you alive? Or is it someone who will give you life? It's important that we choose wisely.

Amen.