

Message for June 14, 2020

Hosea 1:1-3, 3:1-3

It is a cute little story taken from the life of the well-known preacher, William Willimon. It was back in his teenage years and it wasn't long until the Prom. There was one special girl who he really wanted to take but he couldn't muster up the courage to ask her. Night after night he sat staring at the phone rehearsing all the things he would say ... if only he could find the nerve to dial her number.

It was the Thursday evening before the big dance and the phone rang. William answered it and much to his shock, it was HER. To his even greater shock she asked him if he would like to go to the Prom with her. And then she suggested that maybe they could go out for hamburgers first! Reflecting on this little episode decades later William realized that it is in a way, a parable about us and our relationship with God. God loves us and reaches out to us even if we, for whatever reason, cannot or will not reach out to him. This is certainly something that the prophet Hosea came to realize.

Hosea lived over 2,700 years ago and one day God told him that he should get married. Hosea however wasn't to marry just anyone, he had to marry a harlot. Now we don't know what Hosea thought of this rather odd command but nevertheless, being the man of faith that he was, he did as he was told. He married a woman named Gomer. They had a family together, two sons and a daughter, and this all sounds very nice doesn't it? But it wasn't, simply because none of the children were his. Being married didn't stop Gomer from carrying on as she had before. Nevertheless it appears that despite all of the pain and heartache that she caused him, Hosea still loved his wife. But how did Gomer respond? She moved out.

Now by any standards we would care to use, I am sure that most of us would agree that this should have been the end of the marriage. How many people would have continued to love their spouse at this point? Not many I

suspect but Hosea did. When God then told him to go and find his wife and bring her back, off he went. Hosea soon discovered though that far from living a happy and carefree life, his wife had fallen on hard times. In fact when he found her she was literally on the auction block about to be sold as a slave to pay off her debts. Hosea though showed no hesitation. When the bidding started he bid too. He outbid everyone else right down the line! The price he paid for her was astronomical but he was now content. He had his beloved wife back. He had redeemed his wife by his love and for a price.

This is the story of Hosea and his rather shaky marriage and when we think about it, Hosea must have been quite a person. How many people would have still loved and cared for their spouse after they had been hurt the way he had been? How many people would have taken her back at such a price? Not surprisingly all of this turmoil in his personal life had an effect on his professional life as a prophet.

Like most of the prophets at that time, Hosea was forever talking about the impending judgement of God. Indeed the first part of his book is full of dire warnings about what was going to happen if the people of Israel did not repent and mend their ways. Part way through the book though, Hosea changes his tone: he doesn't just talk about God's judgement, he also talks about God's great love for his people too. Of course the prophets had always known about God's love but Hosea was the very first to really emphasize it. Hosea in fact, inspired by his own marriage to Gomer, said that the people of Israel were, in a manner of speaking, married to God. Time after time they had strayed but their husband, almighty God himself, would never say that the marriage was over and done with. Instead he took them back time after time. No matter what they said or did, God's love would never let them go. No matter how often they strayed, he would keep coming after them to bring them home.

It is said that one of our most basic human needs is to know and experience God and to be at peace with him. Indeed much of what we call the Old Testament is the story of God's people striving to do this. There is the Law for example including such as the Ten Commandments. If we could only obey these

rules we would know God and be at peace with him, and by implication with others too. The problem though is that no matter how hard we try, we cannot possibly keep the Law in both thought and deed all of the time. In the words of the old gospel hymn “Rock of Ages”:

Not the labours of my hands
Can fulfill Thy law's demands;
Could my zeal no respite know,
Could my tears forever flow,
All for sin could not atone;
Thou must save, and Thou alone.

This God has done through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. And that of course is the good news and promise of the gospel; that God understands, loves and forgives. Like a loving parent God loves us, not for what we've done or not done but rather because of who and what we are, his beloved children. Yes, sometimes we may act like Gomer thinking that we know best and then make a total mess of things but the good news of the gospel is that God is like Hosea; no matter what we've said or done God still loves us and comes after us.

Now sometimes we may find this hard to believe. We can reflect on our lives and the things we've said and done and feel so unlovable, that we don't deserve his love but even so ... Loves us he does and we are glad to hear this. What can be harder for us to accept though is that God also loves, cares and goes after everyone else too; that he chases after them, whomever they may be, despite the things that they've said and done. Impossible we think and yet this he does. This may be something that we need to remember, living in the frightening and tumultuous times that we are.

The truth is that the love, compassion and forgiveness of God is far beyond all of our human comprehension. Perhaps we can't always understand, love or even forgive others but that doesn't mean that God can't and doesn't. God loves all and his love encompasses all. With that in mind I would like to finish this week's message with this true story simply because it is a story about all of us.

The man had been abandoned as a baby and placed in the care of a church-run orphanage. The great hope of course was that he and the other children would be adopted. Whenever prospective parents came the children would be dressed up and told to behave themselves and look cute. They had to convince the prospective parents to adopt them and love them. Well, every time prospective parents showed up he did his best. He would be on his best behaviour, smile and look as cute as possible, hoping against hope that maybe this time he would be the one chosen. For whatever reason though he never was. The years passed and his 12th birthday was approaching. He was told that he would have to do better as few couples were interested in adopting a teenager. Time was running out and he tried, he really did but he was still passed over. Finally he gave up; he believed that he was unneeded, unwanted and unlovable.

Then one day as he was playing outside with the other children, a big car pulled up. A couple got out and talked to one of the officials. Much to his surprise he was called over. The woman knelt down before him and then said the words that he had always longed to hear: “You are just the little boy we’ve always wanted. Will you come and live with us? We are eager to show you our love.”

This true story isn’t just about how a little boy came to be loved because someone came for him; it is also a story about us and our relationship with God. We may sometimes feel like the little boy in the orphanage; unloved, unwanted and unneeded but the great promise of the gospel is that this simply isn’t true. As Hosea loved Gomer, wouldn’t give up on her and even went after her to bring her home, so too does God with every single one of us. He does so because he knows that the great party at the end of the age, “the lamb’s great bridal feast of bliss and love” just won’t be the same without all of us.