Eighth Sunday After Pentecost

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*“Weak Spots”* Hosea 11:1-11

Very often, when asked to describe the difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament, most of us will burble something along the lines of: “Well, the Old Testament is the story of an *angry* God, but the New Testament is the story of a *kind* God who loves us and sent us Jesus!”

For many of us who have thought or uttered such a description, please take note because this morning’s reading argues for a much more nuanced recitation.

While there is no doubt that Jesus is the incarnation of God’s desire to bring Divine Love more profoundly to our attention through him, we must also admit that the God we encounter in this passage from Hosea sounds as loving and giving and kind as the one we know in the story of Jesus.

Indeed, the God Hosea describes for us here is one who has drawn so near to humankind as to know the way human parents love and care for our children. This is a God who knows the deep and intimate love that is elicited from most fathers as they stand over their sleeping child. Like human fathers, God’s greatest desire is to shelter and protect his infant child.

Hosea tells us that God has felt the same need to lift that infant to her cheek to bring close to her and nurture and tend this little being that she has made. You almost get the feeling that God also remembers what it felt like to carry that child in her own body.

Despite a good deal of what has happened in the first ten chapters of this book called Hosea, here in chapter eleven, Hosea speaks to us of God who loves us deeply and profoundly. Here, too, is an incarnational moment, that is a moment when the love of God is embodied and made tangible for us.

This is a moment when Divine Love is natural, as opposed to mysterious or “other worldly.” This is a moment when Divine Love is obvious and *not* difficult to fathom—we *know* this feeling because we have experienced it ourselves with our own children. Even those of us who have not had children of our own, we know the depth of such feelings. All we have to do is to try to imagine *not* loving or caring about our children. Few of us could do that, and neither can God.

These are the main ideas Hosea wants us to dwell on. First, that we can know what it is like to love like God loves—we can know this much about God. All we have to do is to reflect on the love we have for our own children, how we will always love and protect them, and how we will do everything in our power to give them a good life. This is the foundation upon which we may come to an understanding of who God is and what we may expect in our relationship with God.

So, the second idea we are to come to know is that this also means that our relationship with God will not be broken by God. If brokenness does come to our relationship with God, it will be humans who will do the breaking.

And so, Hosea wants us to take that knowledge of what parental love can do and also consider what love *cannot* do. Parental love does not give-up. No matter what the child does, no matter how much a child disobeys, no matter how much trouble a child gets themselves into, mothers and fathers will still hold out hope and love for that child.

One of the most endearing portraits Hosea paints is that of our Father/Mother God teaching us to walk only to watch as the first thing we do is run away. And that, we have a couple of examples in our midst today, don’t we. Although we smile and look around lovingly for Wyatt and Meiji, Hosea asks us to look at what this means on a larger scale.

We are asked to consider what this means when our running away from God is actually a rejection of God and the relationship of trust and caring that God offers and draws us toward. To run from God also becomes a rejection of the honesty, integrity and compassion God requires in our relationship with God and with each other.

In the case of the Israelites that Hosea knew, in the passage, God points to the way the people have begun to worship other gods—Baal is mentioned more than once here. Hosea also points to the political alliances the Israelites were turning to with Syria and Egypt. To Hosea’s mind, this is tantamount to rejecting God, forgetting the mighty deeds that brought them out of Egypt, and (instead) turning back to slavery.

…I guess we all have our weak spots in our faith and practice.

For the ancient Israelites (to whom Hosea was prophesying) there were weak spots all around. First, there were the Israelites themselves who thought they might fare better with other gods and other arrangements in their public life.

Was Egypt the place that had mercily used them as slaves, had even tried to kill off their infant sons when the population grew too numerous? Never mind. That was yesterday. Today, we want the safety and comfort of their earthly power.

Is the northern kingdom on the brink of collapse? Was Assyria pressing forward in its imperialistic quest to subdue and conquer? Well, maybe we will be safe if we worship *their* gods. It was if God had never acted on their behalf.

It is, perhaps, helpful for us to remember that God has weak spots too.

God’s weak spot is God’s faithfulness to us; God’s hopefulness about us—that we can learn, that we can love, that we can be faithful to the love we have been offered.

Like all of Scripture, this story from the Hebrew Bible asks us to see own lives and circumstances in this context: that is in our relationship with God. In this story, but really in most of the stories from the Bible, we are asked to see and take to heart how utterly committed God has always been to human beings.

And so we recall how:

* God was as in love with Adam and Eve and did not abandon them even after their disobedience.
* God did not abandon Cain even after he committed the first murder, but put a mark on his head to preserve his life.
* God brought Noah and his family through the flood and then promised never to destroy the earth and its people ever again.

As for the people of Hosea’s time, despite their faithlessness, God did not turn away from them. God did not stop loving and coming after them, healing them and leading them with “cords of kindness” and “bands of love.”

And that is our good news, too. No matter what is happening all around us, we need not abandon our real and only hope—which is the love of God, the compassion of God that always looks for a way to reach out to us *one more time*.

That sounds so simple and obvious, but as we all know, the reality is more complex because people are more complex people. For example, a couple of weeks ago, I received a call—out of the blue—from a man who wanted to know if I cared about homelessness. I said I did. “Good,” he replied. “Because I have a plan to get rid of them!”

Despite his unfortunate choice of words, I listened, and he actually does want to help. He proceeded to tell me how he was organizing all sorts of business and non-profit organizations, political support, and financial resources to house the homeless.

His plan is to purchase a big piece of land on the Big Island, and put kinds of housing on it, and all the services you could want or need. Then, all of the homeless folks across the state will be “rounded-up” and deposited there to learn, to be treated, to be nursed, and to be transitioned into housing, a job, and “normal” life.

He saw the “faith-angle” as being foundational to the rest of his plan. He said his plan needed to be grounded in the church. He said I was the first pastor he had called (lucky me!).

Two scenes came to mind as I was listening to him. The first were the many “resettlement” camps that have been erected throughout history and throughout the world. The camps of Nazi Germany came to mind, as did the camps of Japanese citizens here in Hawaii and on the mainland during WWII, and finally there are the concentration camps filled with Uyghur people in present-day China.

That was the first image that came to mind. The second was a particular stretch of South Beretania Street—just a little over five miles from here. It’s the part that rims the baseball park just Ewa of Longs.

On any given morning, there are all sorts of makeshift shelters on the sidewalk. I see them when I do not take the freeway to come to church. Some folks have actual tents. Others cobble together tarps, umbrellas, and whatever else they can find to fashion some kind of a shelter for themselves.

The structures change from one day to the next. Every few months, they disappear altogether when the city decides to move them all out. On those days, there are big trucks and city workers who haul away all of the bits and pieces out of which the street-folks have made their homes.

I was reminded of both of these things as I reflected on Hosea’s words about God and God’s unrelenting love for us. We are held in a love that never tires of caring for us, never stops coming after us, never gives up on having a relationship of mutual faithfulness—no matter how difficult or complex things get.

I thought about camps of refugees and camps of people who do not have homes and how difficult and complex the issues are that cause both types of camps to exist.

One of the things that is common to them both is the real desire to “get rid” of both kinds of problems in the most expedient way possible. That is *humankind’s* weak spot: that we often choose expedience over relationship; that we grow tired and give-up when relationships between people become too time consuming, or expensive.

We grow tired, and we give-up other people, and on our own ability to continue to minister, support, and comfort one another. With some problems—like helping people into healthy living spaces and conditions—we grow tired and give-up because we know there is not going to be just *one* answer because (as we all know) there is not just one cause.

This means that working on the many facets there are to get people off the street is also going to require many people working at many levels, and we will need to continue the work without an end that *we* can foresee.

This is the hard part of our lives—that we do grow tired and want to give-up, or we grow tired and simply want to put an end to our fatigue. Unfortunately, when we get to that point, most often we end-up talking about “getting rid” of one (or more) categories of people, and sooner, rather than later, we end-up with camps full of refugees.

It is at this point that we are called to remember what we have learned about God throughout all of the pages of the Bible—both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. What we learn throughout all of those hallowed pages is that ours is a God who has only one weak spot: God’s inability stop loving humankind. God’s helplessness when it comes to turning away from us.

And even when we are tired and despairing, God’s dearest desire is that we remember how God taught us—

*—to walk,* and *took* [us] *up in* [God’s] *arms;* [and we] *did not know that* [God] *healed* [us]*.* [That God] *led* [us] *with cords of human kindness, with bands of love.* [God] *was to* [us] *like those who lift infants to their cheeks.* [God] *bent down to* [us] *and fed*[us]*.* [3,4]

In the months and years that lie ahead of us—as individuals and also as a church—there are going to be decisions to make and actions to pursue. As we dream and discern together, my prayer for us is that we will do so remembering the one weak spot God has which is God’s love for us which is so great that we can be assured that God will never leave us, never stop making plans for our future, will never stop having hope for us.

I pray that this will be our “second wind” when things get tiring or strange, and our inspiration, our light when the road ahead looks dim. I pray we will remember God’s weak spot, hold on to each other, and go forward together.

May this be so. Amen.