

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, November 12, 2023

As you moved across the waters of creation, we pray you might move once again amongst us this day. Spirit, come among us and fall fresh. Draw forth from us goodness and grace. Teach us in these moments that we might be your loving children in the world. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen.

Beginning in the first verse of the 11th chapter of Hosea—

When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son.

The more I called them,
the more they went from me;
they kept sacrificing to the Baals
and offering incense to idols.

Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk;
I took them up in my arms,
but they did not know that I healed them.

I led them with cords of human kindness,
with bands of love.
I was to them like those
who lift infants to their cheeks.
I bent down to them and fed them.

They shall return to the land of Egypt,
and Assyria shall be their king,
because they have refused to return to me.

The sword rages in their cities;
it consumes their oracle priests
and devours because of their schemes.

My people are bent on turning away from me.
To the Most High they call,
but he does not raise them up at all.

How can I give you up, Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, O Israel?
How can I make you like Admah?
How can I treat you like Zeboiim?
My heart recoils within me;
my compassion grows warm and tender.

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I will not execute my fierce anger;
I will not again destroy Ephraim,
for I am God and no mortal,
the Holy One in your midst,
and I will not come in wrath.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever.
Amen.

So there'll be a time in the not too distant future when I stop talking about my house and getting moved in, um, but it's not this morning, okay? So I'm hosting a little party this afternoon, and that means I've been trying to put everything out and get them organized, and so I was looking at one particular beautiful piece of furniture. That's the thing—I've gotten to inherit all the furniture from the family, and I was looking at one particular beautiful piece that is...is empty. It has a beautiful glass door that would display wonderful dishes or figurines, if you will. It's empty right now, not because I don't have some things I could put in there, but because what was there during my childhood doesn't exist anymore. There was a fateful day when I decided to climb a coat rack that was too close to this piece of furniture, and, uh, I came crashing down, and so did all the figurines and dishes that were in that piece of furniture. And I lay there in the mess that I had made—the broken pottery and the broken glass—for a second. I was probably about 5 years old. I knew I had done something terrible. I heard the pitter patter of my mom's feet coming down the hallway, and she came and she surveyed the damage, and she looked at me; and with a calmness that must have been a gift from God, she said, “Go to your room.” If I'm being honest I heard that phrase uttered by her or my dad many times as a child. “Go to your room.” My room was—in Charlotte—it was the last room on the right at the end of the hallway, and I would go in there, and I would ruminate. Maybe you were told as a child to go to your room. Wasn't that an interesting time? Before we could distract ourselves with all sorts of things, we just had to sit with our feelings, right? And so I would do that, and if I'm honest, um I've really thought of going to your room in that way, just from that self-centered point of view. But as I was reading the text this week, I was imagining not only the space that ‘go into my room’ created for me emotionally, but perhaps the space that was of greater importance in the moment was for my mother or for my father when I was sent to my room. When our children disappoint us, anger us, frustrate us, we would love to be able to respond tenderly in the moment, but we're human, so sometimes that isn't possible. Or maybe it is for a moment, but at some point we have to process our stuff and get it out, and so going to my room gave my mom and my dad space to also process. That's what I actually love about the text that we have this morning. We get to see through the poet's words, through Hosea, we get to see God as parent, navigating the beautiful and difficult journey of what it means to be a parent. There's this tenderness. There's this tenderness to God as parent. Beginning in the third verse we get to read about this. “I taught Ephraim to walk.” If you're a parent perhaps you remember teaching a child to walk or holding their hand when they stumbled those first couple steps. “I took them up in my arms. I led them with cords of human kindness and with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them.” There's this tenderness and beauty in the words

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of the poet to describe God as our parent. In this case the child is Israel. We don't stay just in that tenderness. We get to journey with God through all the complexity of what it means to be a parent. I was speaking to a good friend of mine who's a parent of two this week. She said, "You know, um, to love a child is physically exhausting. They have more energy than we can possibly muster. It wears us out, makes us sleep hard at night. But to love an adolescent or to love a grown child, that's exhausting in a different way. That's taxing emotionally and spiritually." So maybe you're a parent this morning, and if you are, then I hope that you'll hear this passage from Hosea as an affirmation that parenting is hard work. It is something that takes intention and energy. There's a tenderness that comes from God as a parent, but there's also, there's also some other emotions that we need to navigate as well. See Israel is the child of God, the children of God; and scripture is clear that the way in which Israel is living—forgetting God. The way in which they are living is taking them back to a place of separation, or, if we keep the metaphor, estrangement. It is taking them from a place of close tender relationship to a place where they are divided from their loving parent. What's interesting is that this is not punishment brought down by God. The scripture does not say to us that because Israel has lived in this way I will send them back to Egypt. Verse 5 says, "They shall return to Egypt." It is the way in which they are moving through the world that is leading to this sort of estrangement. I don't want it to happen. No parent does. This text is the lament of a parent over the suffering of their children. It is a lament of a parent over the separation that they have from their children. And to be sure, the emotions are real for God as well. There's an anger that wells in the heart of God. The text tells us that. This tender heart that could lean down and pick up a child and hold it against, hold that child against the cheek. It is also mad, because they're doing it again. Just last week we heard from First Kings this dividing of loyalty between the true God and the idols of the world, and once again the people continue in this pattern of not recognizing the God that is their true God. They deserve the wrath of God, yet the heart of God can not do that to them. Love, it turns out, is incapable of forsaking those who are beloved. That's an important message for us this morning. We called ourselves at the beginning of worship by singing "Come Ye Sinners, poor and needy." There is a degree to which each of us strays from God. There's a degree to which each of us lives in a way that returns us to a place of estrangement, returns us, if you will, to a place we might call Egypt; and yet God continues to be the faithful parent. God continues to wrestle with God's own love for us—a love that will not let us go, so that in verse eight we hear, "How can I give you up? How can I hand you over; how can I make you like the ones who have been destroyed, like the ones I have forsaken. Just thinking about that makes my heart recoil within me. And even as I think about it, my...my compassion for you grows more warm and tender. Instead of being hardened by the ways that you stray from me, I'm actually softened. I'm actually more open. I actually realize that this love that I have for you will not allow whatever anger I also hold to have the final word. I will...I'll draw you back. You're a little bigger now; I might not be able to pick you up and hold you to my cheek, but I can embrace you. I can love you. I can show you that I am no mortal. I am your God."

Perhaps you're a parent, and so perhaps you have in mind the children that you bore into this world. Or perhaps you're not, and we're wondering together what it might mean for us then to reflect this parental love of God into the world if we don't have children. I was reading this week

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about some children who actually teach us how to do that. You know the message of this is that there is... there is no... there is nothing in this world, as Ainsley reminded us before our passing of the peace, there is nothing in this world that can separate us from the love of God. Yet, we as God's people often neglect that; we forget it. We imagine that there are some who are too far gone, too far separated. The story that I read this week has captivated me. It's a story about high school students serving as pallbearers for military veterans who were homeless when they died or without family. The University of Detroit Jesuit School. These high schoolers have begun this ministry. One of their spiritual directors began the Pallbearer Ministry. Student volunteers take time out of their school day to help support a ceremony or a burial for veterans or others who would otherwise be buried alone. Rick Mazyck, the Director of Spiritual Care, says, "They have no family and friends that anyone is able to contact. It's a reminder for us then as we do this Ministry that every person, especially in the Christian religious tradition, is made in the image of God and is deserving of a particular regard and respect. The Pallbearer Ministry at the school began after six seniors volunteered to help bury three unclaimed veterans," unclaimed in October of 2015, unclaimed by the world, but not of God." Since then volunteers have helped carry veterans and ceremonies at Great Lakes' National Cemetery and other cemeteries around the Detroit area." A former student says that "This was an opportunity to give something to someone who finished their life on the fringe of society, separated from those who love them most deeply. These veterans were men and women that I never met, but they had helped to make the country I live in safer and stronger. No matter who they were or what they did on Earth, every person deserves a proper burial. Before the services the volunteers try to learn about the deceased. They look through the online obituary. Sometimes they learn only the deceased's name, while other times their whole life story is available. Sometimes the students find out that they are related to someone that they are burying or that they have a friend who is related. Sometimes the students carry the coffin. Other times they act as a team of Honor Guards, providing support and prayer for the deceased. The volunteers often reflect after the service that they use the experience as a way to grow as both students and humans. It's great to be with other people and pray with them, to encourage them or just be present with them when they are in their sorrow. We all have times and moments of sorrow in our lives, most especially during the passing of a loved one or friend or a colleague. So it's really an honor and in itself its own consolation to be able to offer some support." I read that story this week, and it reminded me of the ways in which we can in our small ways show the love of God that will never allow us to be separated from the body. High school boys teaching us how not to forget, how not to turn away, how not to neglect, how always to honor, how always to love.

Beloved as God's children you are never forsaken, never forgotten, never turned from. The ways in which you live might make you feel like you're going to a place that is separate from God, like Egypt might feel, like estrangement, but it is...it's a lie, because the love of God is always, always pursuing you in those places, always drawing you back, always open and always embracing of you in your totality. Beloved, God's final word for us is always forgiveness. It is always love. It is always Grace. And so here's my hope. You might not be able to act as those high school boys act in Detroit, but what we can do as the body this week is we can live as if all of us are beloved in the sight of God. All of us are children of the most high. None of us, no

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matter what we have done or how we have lived, can be separated from that love. It is our calling as the body of Christ to live in that way in the world, so that our word to our families whether they be our nuclear or the broader church family, and to our neighbors might always be one of love—the love of a parent for a child, the love that stoops down and picks up, the love that feeds and clothes, the one that tends and heals. May we...may we honor our loving parent in the ways that we live this week.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.