Lesson 4 22       June 28

Forever Love

Purpose

To experience the unconditional love of God

Hearing the Word

The background text for this lesson is Hosea 1:1–3:5.

Hosea 1:2-11 (NIV)

2 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.”

3 So he married Gomer daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son.

4 Then the Lord said to Hosea, “Call him Jezreel, because I will soon punish the house of Jehu for the massacre at Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of Israel.

5 In that day I will break Israel’s bow in the Valley of Jezreel.”

6 Gomer conceived again and gave birth to a daughter. Then the Lord said to Hosea, “Call her Lo-Ruhamah (which means “not loved”), for I will no longer show love to Israel, that I should at all forgive them.

7 Yet I will show love to Judah; and I will save them—not by bow, sword or battle, or by horses and horsemen, but I, the Lord their God, will save them.”

8 After she had weaned Lo-Ruhamah, Gomer had another son.

9 Then the Lord said, “Call him Lo-Ammi (which means “not my people”), for you are not my people, and I am not your God.

10 Yet the Israelites will be like the sand on the seashore, which cannot be measured or counted. In the place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ they will be called ‘children of the living God.’

11 The people of Judah and the people of Israel will come together; they will appoint one leader and will come up out of the land, for great will be the day of Jezreel.”

Hosea 1:2-11 (KJV)

2 The beginning of the word of the Lord by Hosea. And the Lord said to Hosea, Go, take unto thee a wife of whoredoms and children of whore-dom: for the land hath committed great whore-dom, departing from the Lord.

3 So he went and took Gomer the daughter of Diblaim; which conceived, and bare him a son.

4 And the Lord said unto him, Call his name Jezreel; for yet a little while, and I will avenge the blood of Jezreel upon the house of Jehu, and will cause to cease the kingdom of the house of Israel.

5 And it shall come to pass at that day, that I will break the bow of Israel, in the valley of Jezreel.

6 And she conceived again, and bare a daughter. And God said unto him, Call her name Loruhamah: for I will no more have mercy upon the house of Israel; but I will utterly take them away.

7 But I will have mercy upon the house of Judah, and will save them by the Lord their God, and will not save them by bow, nor by sword, nor by battle, by horses, nor by horsemen.

8 Now when she had weaned Loruhamah, she conceived, and bare a son.

9 Then said God, Call his name Loammi: for ye are not my people, and I will not be your God.

10 Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured nor numbered; and it shall come to pass, that in the place where it was said unto them, Ye are not my people, there it shall be said unto them, Ye are the sons of the living God.

11 Then shall the children of Judah and the children of Israel be gathered together, and appoint themselves one head, and they shall come up out of the land: for great shall be the day of Jezreel.
Seeing the Need

As a child I would occasionally hear someone say, “A picture is worth a thousand words.” I knew they meant that seeing is more persuasive and evidence of a truth than just speaking it. I recall hearing older people in my community during that time make other statements like, “I’d rather see a sermon any day than to hear one.” Still other phrases like, “I can’t hear what you say from seeing what you do,” were common. I don’t know whether these statements were excuses for people not to go to church, but I did get the message. Seeing is believing! Actions do speak louder than words.

This truth was also impressed upon me during my seminary years. My preaching professor told us that persuasion takes place in three ways. Some people are persuaded by logic, while others are persuaded by emotions, and still others are persuaded by the life of the speaker. By far the life of the speaker is the most lasting and persuasive. Can you see Christ in the person’s life? Does the individual model the Christian faith? Does his or her walk compliment or contradict their talk? It is a vivid reminder of the Apostle James’ words: “You must be doers of the word and not only hearers who mislead themselves” (James 1:22).

Hosea’s story is a picture of God’s love toward Israel that no doubt left an indelible impression on the people of his day. The truth for us from his story is that God’s merciful and everlasting love remains the same, and we can experience this love today.

Hosea’s Call

Hosea’s call to ministry was typical of other prophets of his day. The first verse in this short book opens with the words, “The LORD’s word that came to Hosea” (Hosea 1:1). We see this same or a very similar pattern of words used with the introductions to the calls of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Micah, Zephaniah, and other prophets. This similarity gives us internal evidence that Hosea’s call and unique assignment was just as authentic as his contemporaries. His prophetic ministry would play a vital role in revealing God’s longstanding and redeeming love toward Israel and Judah. If the people heard the prophet regardless of how he spoke or presented his message, redemption and
restoration would come to the land.

We find God’s commission to Hosea in verse 2: “Go, marry a prostitute and have children of prostitution,” the LORD told him. Wow! I believe this would have taken the breath out of most preachers and Christian workers I know. LORD, you want me to do what? The text records these as God’s exact words to Hosea, but people understand Hosea’s story in different ways. Some see it as a literal story of a God who used radical means to get the attention of fallen humanity. Others see it as allegory pointing us towards deeper truths, while others acknowledge that they simply don’t know. These differing ways of understanding do not lessen the truths it reveals about God. In whatever way we theologically choose to unwrap Hosea’s story, it is part of the historical and holy canon that has been handed down to us today. For the purposes of this lesson, we will simply share the story with its implications for spiritual life and growth and allow God’s gracious love to speak to us.

The LORD made it plain to Hosea that his actions would represent truth and thus give Israel an up close and personal look at divine love. Hosea was to marry a prostitute as a picture of how Israel had prostituted herself to false gods and pagan practices. Israel’s behavior was like that of a prostitute who deliberately and intentionally chose not to change her ways. The very word “prostitute” conjures up ideas like unfaithful, lewd, vulgar, and rebellious. Added to this bizarre marital arrangement was a spouse who publicly and unashamedly refused to receive genuine love. For those with spiritual eyes to see, there was more to this marriage than how things appeared.

The text does not tell us anything about Hosea’s courtship with Gomer. However, the prophet did love Gomer and he did marry her. Personally I believe that in spite of all the community whispers and gossip that likely surrounded this marriage, Hosea’s life was made richer towards God. How? Because he knew personally what it felt like to give love and not have that love returned. He knew and personally experienced the agony and pain of rejection. In short, Hosea got a human glimpse of God’s divine and everlasting love toward humankind. Such love is beyond our ability to comprehend, yet it is God’s free gift bestowed upon us.

Hosea’s socially unaccepted and unorthodox marriage really does have a message for our modern world. In what some have called the Bible in a nutshell, John 3:16 is good news for a troubled world. “God so loved the world that he gave.” This giving is not based on whether we want or deserve this love. Instead, it is simply the nature of the Giver. Hosea knew how it felt as one who freely gave his love to Gomer whether she received it or not. This love was not based on what Gomer did but on what Hosea did. Such love is almost too good to believe. We can see the beauty of Hosea’s story when we accept the free gift of God’s unconditional love. This
redeeming love is our historical witness to a broken world.

**In what ways have you experienced God’s love?**

**Hosea’s Message**

Hosea’s symbolic proclamation went beyond marriage to Gomer. God also commanded him to have children in this marriage. The names of these children would represent and give a deeper explanation of God’s wrath and love towards Israel. In other words, their physical presence would serve as a constant reminder of God’s forewarned actions toward the nation. The Hebrew names of these three children were Jezreel, meaning “God scatters,” Lo-Ruhamah, meaning “No Compassion,” and Lo-Ammi, meaning “Not My People” (Hosea 1:4, 6, 9). Nothing in the text suggests that these children were rebellious in attitude or character. They were very possibly model children. However, God would use their names to remind Israel of her rebellious nature and about things to come.

People sometimes give their children names that characterize a particular time or event in their lives. When the wife of a friend became pregnant, he immediately jumped into action. The couple made doctor’s appointments, prepared a room, and purchased baby clothes. And my friend lavished a little extra dose of TLC on his wife. During the middle of her pregnancy, medical complications arose. Things just didn’t look good. As time went on and delivery day rapidly approached, the doctor informed my friend that he would need to make a decision. Medical complications required either that the pregnancy be terminated so the mother could live, or the mother would die so that the baby could live. Baffled, afraid, and a little angry at God, my friend prayed and sought the prayers of others. His decision, to the dismay of some, was to take no action on the matter, as he felt that life and death are in God’s hands. It would be God’s call. Delivery day arrived, and at last the doctor came to the waiting room. My friend was the proud father of a baby girl, and the mother was miraculously doing fine! At the bedside of the shaky but otherwise well mom, the couple decided to name the child “Wonder” as a perpetual reminder of God’s unfathomable and redeeming love toward them during a difficult time.

Jezreel (God scatters) would keep before the nation that God’s impending judgment would fall upon the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel (verse 4). The ruling power of this dynasty would soon crumble and the mighty bow and might of Israel would be broken. God would scatter and shake things up in response to evil and corruption. Lo-Ruhamah (No Compassion) would remind the people that God’s hand of compassion and comfort would be withdrawn (at least temporarily) from Israel (verse 6). Lastly, Lo-Ammi (Not My People) would help these rebellious Israelites to see God’s utter frustration with them. Israel had repeatedly broken covenant with God (verse 9). Yet, and as a review of Israel’s history shows, God’s
love always covers a multitude of faults.

As a pastor for over forty years, I have had the privilege of performing numerous weddings. I require some degree of pastoral counseling before the marriage, which gives me the opportunity to try and assess the seriousness of the soon-to-be union. Marriage is a covenant relationship between two individuals and God and must be entered into reverently under God, with love and loyalty as its anchoring posts. Unfortunately, I cannot boast of a 100% faithfulness success rate on the part of all the couples I married. Hosea’s message was that despite Israel’s unfaithfulness to God, God was always the faithful partner in the covenant.

*How do you understand yourself as a covenant partner with God? How does this affect your daily walk with God?*

**Hope for Israel**

The theme of harlotry with other gods as portrayed by Gomer runs throughout the Book of Hosea. The LORD forever reminded Israel of their sins and shortcomings through the words of the prophets of that day. It was not that the nations of Judah and Israel did not know, but instead they chose not to obey. Moses had instructed the people how they were to enter into the Promised Land (see Exodus and Deuteronomy). They were not to take with them the gods of Egypt into this new land nor were they to embrace and worship the gods of the Canaanite world. This command was not antisocial in nature but was designed to keep the people focused on God. Moses had earlier forewarned these Israelites that obedience would bring blessings while disobedience would bring curses and judgment (See Deuteronomy 28). The image of Hosea’s tumultuous marriage so appropriately showed God’s love in the midst of Israel’s lust and spiritual adultery with false gods.

Israel’s past sins and disobedience before God must not be minimized or overshadowed by God’s forgiving and redeeming love. The Gomer and Hosea story is more than a doom and gloom story. Yes, sin is a horrible spiritual disease that only seeks to undermine and destroy our moral integrity as human beings. On the other hand, God is good and rich in grace and love. Gomer was sinful but Hosea was righteous. Paul tells us that “where sin increased, grace multiplied even more” (Romans 5:20). This truth is not a pass to disobey or do wrong but is a constant reminder that God’s forgiving love is constantly near and available to us.

As a child, I got my share of discipline and punishment. The hidden blessing for me was that I so often learned the lesson but forgot the punishment. It had a redemptive and saving quality.

Likewise, God always has a redemptive purpose in bringing judgment. Hebrews tells us that “the Lord disciplines whomever he loves” (Hebrews 12:6). The goal of my mother’s punishment was to make me a better me (and she did).
Likewise, God’s ultimate goal in bringing punishment on Israel was always to make Israel a better Israel. It was never for sport or the actions of a selfish and unsympathetic God. Love always takes whatever steps are necessary to bring about a fruitful end. A friend once thanked me for sharing with him an embarrassing and unChristlike habit he had. “Thanks for caring enough about me to tell me the truth,” he told me. Thank God for caring enough about fallen humanity to discipline us from time to time.

Don’t miss the holy call of Hosea’s story. It is a call to know and experience unconditional love. Furthermore, don’t let the radical and social unacceptability of Hosea’s marriage cause you to miss the free gift of God. God loves us! This holy love plays out in Scripture and in our lives over and over again in spite of our seemingly continuous rebellious attitude.

Meditate on the concept of covenant relationship this coming week. God desires this kind of relationship with each person. God desires this relationship with you. Despite your shortcomings and faults, you are the apple of God’s eye. What manner of love is this? Claim your weakness yet celebrate your redemption through the words of John Newton’s beloved hymn: “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see.” Experience the love!

**How has the knowledge of God’s forgiving grace given you hope for the future?**

Lord, may we never forget that your love for us is unending and always seeks to bring us into covenant relationship with you. Thank you! In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.