

Sermon for Sunday, April 4, 1976, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor  
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"GOD HAS A WIFE WHO CHEATS"

Hosea 3:1-5; 11:1-12

Text: "I will not execute my fierce anger, I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come to destroy." --Hosea 11:9

Someone has said, "How odd of God--to choose the Jews!" Yet, that is exactly what God did. If you or I were going to pick a nation for ourselves, we wouldn't have picked the Hebrews. They were a bunch of nobodys, serving in Egypt as slaves. There was absolutely nothing attractive about them. And even after God chose them to be his people and began to lead them to the promised land, they complained, they whined, they griped, they murmured. And in spite of all of this, God led them on. Out there in the wilderness they rebelled, they turned their backs on God, they fashioned a golden calf and worshipped it. Yet God kept loving them, and he spoke of his relationship to them as that of a family; he spoke of Israel as his bride; he called himself her husband. The only problem was, God had a wife who cheated.

Well, the years went by and they had claimed the promised land long ago. Under David, the Hebrews had risen to greatness but after the reign of his son Solomon, the nation had sort of a civil war and split, north and south. The Southern Kingdom was made up of two of the 12 tribes, Benjamin and Judah; thereafter it was called by the name of the larger tribe, Judah. The Northern Kingdom was made up of the other 10 tribes. Sometimes it was called after the great patriarch, Israel, and sometimes it was called by the name of the largest of the 10 tribes, Ephraim.

To the north of Ephraim/Israel was the great empire of Assyria. Assyria was marshaling its forces to march against Egypt and in the path of its armies lay the little nation of Ephraim/Israel. There was a prophet, a man of God, named Hosea. It didn't take much political savvy to see what would happen to Israel. She would be ground under the heel of Assyria. She would be chewed up by a larger and superior war machine and spit out in little pieces. And when that happened, everybody in Israel would be asking, "Why did God let this happen to us?" Their cities would be leveled, their fields set to the torch, their vineyards destroyed, and the people carried off into captivity. And out of the ruin they would ask, "Why us, God?"

So, God sent Hosea to Israel to tell them what the problem was--and the problem was that God had a wife who cheated. And in order to tell the Hebrews about themselves and how it was between them and God, Hosea began to live out a sort of parable before them. Since Israel was cheating on God there were pagan temples in the land. We are told that a part of the pagan worship includes temple prostitutes. So Hosea went to one of these pagan temples and took one of those prostitutes. Her name was Gomer.

And that was the first message of the parable--like Hosea choosing Gomer, God had chosen an underserving, unworthy, ungodly group of people to be his nation. They were as unlikely a mate for God as Gomer was as unlikely a bride for a man of God like Hosea. Yet, out of his goodness and graciousness, and without any merit or worthiness on their part, God had chosen Israel to be his people, to be his wife.

So, Hosea took Gomer into his home. He lavished his love upon her; he provided for her every need; he gave her things she never dreamed would be hers. She was given a home, security, love and blessings. And this was the second message of the parable, for God had lavished his love upon his people. He had given them blessings in abundance and their land had flowed with milk and honey.

But Gomer was not content with her new way of life. Her memory is short and she has forgotten all of the dreadful, bad parts of her old way of life and she begins to remember her old ways with longing. Thus, one day she slips away--she leaves her husband--and returns to her former life. This is the third message of the parable that Hosea is living out before Israel, for this is exactly what Israel has done to God. She has become a cheating wife who has turned her back on God, who has left the one who loves her, has left the one who provided for her every need and blessed her with all she enjoys. Yes, Israel is like a cheating wife who has betrayed her husband.

But the story goes on. Life in the pagan temple is not what Gomer had remembered it to be. It is a hard and cruel life. Her usefulness to the temple officials comes to an end and she is put on the slave block to be sold to the highest bidder. What a tragic figure she is--what shame and humility she must feel. As she stands there before the crowd all dignity is gone and she is but a poor piece of property to be bid for like a piece of chattel. And this is the fourth message of the parable, for the sins of Israel will destroy her--she will be like a slave sold at auction to the highest bidder. The penalty for her rebellion, for turning her back on God, for leaving her husband who loved her, will be to become a slave to the evil forces of the world. They will be degraded and humiliated and despised.

But still the story goes on. When the bidding is over and her new owner comes to claim her, Gomer discovers to her astonishment that it is Hosea who has bought her. By law she was already his--she belonged to him by rights. Yet, Hosea pays the price again--he buys back what is already rightfully his. In love and self-sacrifice he redeems, he buys back, he pays the ransom in order to restore his wife to his side. And that is the fifth message of the parable. God will redeem his people. He will buy them back again. He will restore them to his side even though they have been like a cheating wife.

Could you have done that? Could you have been that forgiving, that loving? Would you be willing to pay the price again for what was rightfully yours? It would be hard, wouldn't it? A man would find it hard to do. And that's what our text is all about: "I will not execute my fierce anger, I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come to destroy." So, what Hosea was talking about in the parable he was living out with Gomer was just this--the amazing grace of God!

Let me call several things to your attention. Notice first the character of Gomer. Although she was unworthy and undeserving, she had had every love and care lavished upon her. All she had was a gracious and loving gift. Yet, somehow this failed to satisfy her. So it was she returned to her old sins, her old way of life. And when you stop to think about it, Gomer's greatest problem was not that she came out of sin, but that she returned to it.

I can see myself reflected in Gomer--can't you? Isn't it true that all we have is the gift of a gracious and generous God who has bestowed his bounty upon us? And yet, can we say that we live lives of gratitude and appreciation for all we have? I suspect that each of us knows deep down in his own heart that he has not been

completely faithful to God. No, all of us would have to confess that though God made us and by rights we are his, still we have deserted him, fled from him, and in many ways have prostituted our souls to sin. Who of us this morning could claim that he has been totally and completely faithful to God? And perhaps the greatest problem all of us have this morning is not so much that we come out of sin, but that we keep returning to it.

The second thing I would call to your attention is the character of Hosea's love. And since Hosea's relationship to Gomer represents God's relationship to you and me, let me point out three things about Hosea's love. First Hosea's love for Gomer was not contingent upon her loving him. In spite of the way she treated him, Hosea never stopped loving Gomer. And that's how God loves you this morning! God's love for us doesn't depend on how much we love him--he loves us just the same. And whoever you are this morning, no matter what you have done, no matter what sins you have committed, God still loves you. Do you remember how I John puts it? "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins." (4:10) There may be someone here this morning who feels guilty and unworthy because you know you have been unfaithful to God. I want to give you the good news that in spite of your sin, God still loves you.

Second, note that Hosea's love for Gomer was a persistent love. He was not willing to let Gomer go. He searched for her. He sought her until he found her. Can you imagine how he must have felt, seeking for her in her old haunts, knowing that somewhere she lived in her old sins? Yet, he persisted until he found her. That's the sort of persistent love God has for you and me. Some of us are here this morning because something in our hearts keeps drawing us--that is God's persistent love. Some of us may not really want to be here this morning, but somehow things worked out that we came and that was God's persistent love, reaching out to touch our hearts and to draw us to him. Sometimes when we are involved in some evil deed our conscience will begin to hurt us and that is God's persistent love, reaching down even into our sin, to touch our hearts.

Third, note that Hosea's love for Gomer was sacrificial. Even though she belonged to him by rights, he bought her back again--he paid the price for her redemption. And isn't that exactly what God has done for each one of us? Did you ever stop to think where our sin leads us? You see, we end up on the devil's auction block, a slave to our base passions, our greeds, our lusts. We are no longer our own masters. How shall we find freedom from our sins? Who will pay the price of our rebellion and disobedience? Who will pay the penalty for sin? Who will redeem us--buy us back--from our spiritual slavery?

And God says, "I will." Do you know what the price on your head is? Do you know what the cost of your spiritual freedom is? The price for your freedom is the life of one son. And that's what God pays for you. One son--one cross--one death--for you, for me. That's what God paid to redeem us, to buy us back again.

We don't know what happened to Hosea and Gomer after that, the Bible doesn't tell us. Hosea had done all he could. He had loved Gomer, lost her, and bought her back. That was as far as he could go. What happened after that depended on Gomer.

God made you and loved you--he lost you--he bought you back again. That's as far as he can go with such an incredible, amazing grace. How your story ends depends on you.