

# The Word That Wounds and Heals

From the series: Moving On To Maturity

*Text: Hosea 10:12; 11:8; 14:4*

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*Transcription of the spoken sermon*

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This spring I had several messages on the general theme, "The Varieties of Religious Experience," and, thinking about that, I was reminded again of the fact that that is precisely true, there is a variety of religious experience. The variety is determined somewhat by the way one is raised or nurtured, but on the other hand, there is a certain something in all of us that makes us more attuned to one approach than another. That is the impossibility of a congregation at worship because you have all kinds of people who respond differently to different stimuli and out of different backgrounds with different nurture, and then one tries to weave that all together. Some of you who have been with me for a long time know that some years ago it was a very telling moment for me when at a seminar at McCormick Seminary in Chicago, a Presbyterian school, they brought the venerable old Lutheran theologian Joseph Sittler in as a guest lecturer, and he was needling the Presbyterians there, thinking that they were all Presbyterians there, which I suppose most of them were, and he said, "You know, you Presbyterians always route it through the head, always approach through the mind, in an intellectualistic approach to faith, whereas the Catholic tradition is more of an intuitive approach using symbols, sacraments, incense." (We used incense here once but everyone started coughing; we have to get accustomed to incense before we can use it full-blown.)

When I came home from that seminar, it was a moment of awareness for me to realize that there was actually more than one legitimate way to worship and some people can be approached more fruitfully in one way and some in another, and I thought to myself, "Why must one choose?" and from that moment on it has been our intention here to weave a tapestry of worship in such a way that there are those moments when various people can be approached, where the entrée to different kinds of responses to religious stimuli can be honored, moments when the word is addressed, as now, which has been the characteristic of our tradition, but an enrichment of the rest of the service so there are those moments, even moments of silence. Marcus Borg, when he was here, thought we were a bit wordy, although he affirmed our worship, but he spoke, perhaps you will remember, even for a place of silence in worship.

We have been a wordy people, and it has been the tradition that has shaped me, and consequently, the tradition that shapes this congregation probably most forcefully. I want to look at that this morning; I want you to think with me about the word that wounds and heals, and in so doing, I go to Hosea because the Hebrew prophets were the ones who majored in this idea of the word of God as a word of address. In fact, that is that which distinguished Israel from its neighbors at the time, and the conception of the word of God spoken through the human voice is a conception that formed and shaped the people of Israel. The eighth century prophets, particularly, were these marvelous expositors of a word of God in the midst of the concrete historical situation. The prophetic ministry of the Church, the address to the world in its time and in its context derives from that Hebrew prophetic tradition, Hosea, certainly one of the best. I love him because of the things that I read this morning, a selective reading. I could have gone anywhere in the prophetic corpus of the Hebrew scriptures, but I read Hosea because there is so clearly the wounding word and the healing word, and the word of God ought always to be understood to be wounding and healing, and wounding in order to heal. There is no purpose in a wounding word of God that does not bring, finally, the word of grace and healing.

Hosea had to confront the northern kingdom in the last period of their existence before the Assyrian empire removed them in 722 B.C.E. Hosea prophesied in a time of public turmoil, social unrest, the exploitation of the poor and the vulnerable. In that sense, Hosea's ministry was very much like most of the other Hebrew prophets. They called Israel to account for its failure to live faithfully in covenant with God and to have justice mark their social life. And so, he called Israel to repent. It's time to break up the fallow ground. It's time to sow righteousness and reap the steadfast love of the Lord, and in the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter there is a summary, as it were, Hosea being the spokesperson for God, who speaks about how tenderly God had nurtured Israel when Israel was in Egypt, "I called my son," and how he picked him up and how he fed him and how he cared for him and how he nurtured him, and then the statement, "But Israel continues to turn away." They turn away and so they're going to go back into exile. Once again they are going to become the victims of Assyria; they are going to go back to Egypt. "I'm done with them," God says. Then those very tender words, "How can I give you up? How can I give you up? I can't give you up. A human being would give you up, but I'm not human; I am God."

The closing verses of the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter speak about Israel flowering as a garden with the dew of heaven falling upon it, the fragrance of Lebanon's wines marking it, a picture of the healing. "I will heal you of your faithlessness."

I use that only illustratively. It is characteristic of the prophetic word. It is a word that exposes. It is a word that tells the truth. It is a word that calls a spade a spade. It is a word that makes us uneasy, uncomfortable in our ambiguity and equivocation of our lives. It is a word that exposes our self-centeredness, our selfishness. It is a word that calls us to right living, to the practice of justice and to

the ministry of mercy. It is a word that addresses us in our humanness and tells us in the name of God to clean up our act, to get on with the work, to do the task, whatever it may be, in whatever concrete situation, wherever there is compromise, with our accountability to the faithful God. There the word of God in public address dresses us down, but only for our own good, only in order to say to us, "I'll never let you go. The steadfast love of the Lord will never let you go." It is a word that wounds and heals, and it wounds, not taking any satisfaction in the wounding, but in order to awaken, in order to break through to the dullness of a heart of stone, in order to call us up short, in order that we might be consciously embraced, conscious of that unconditional love that will keep us forever. That is the prophetic task of the prophetic word of God in the midst of the people of God.

I use Hosea, as I said, simply as an illustration of that which has shaped and marked our tradition, that which is a big part of our Sunday morning experience.

I have in your liturgies a rather extended excerpt from an address of Karl Barth in 1922. Now, that is Karl Barth. When you look at the bibliographical reference, I want you to know that Karl is not Carl, but Karl. Karl Barth cannot be with a "C." And it is Barth, but there's an "h" on the end, and we knock the h out of Karl Barth. In the European pronunciation, the h is silent, but when I looked at that, Carl Bart, I thought, "Oh, my gosh. I am embarrassed. I am humiliated. I don't want one of those to go anywhere out of this church." I want you to take them home and read them several times, but I want you to change it to Karl Barth. I thought everybody knew about Karl Barth, but my mistake. I should have faxed it in. I did it on the telephone. It's correct phonetically, but don't let anybody know we did that.

Anyway, Karl Barth was probably the greatest theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and where did his theology come from? Where does this huge production come from? It came from the task of preaching. Karl Barth, in the early part of this century, graduated from the finest European institutions of learning. He was deeply indebted to and steeped in the culture of Europe, and he went to a little Swiss village to preach. He got into the pulpit, this highly educated, highly cultured genius and brilliant man, and he had nothing to say, and he began to struggle with the word of God. His theology, the Bartian theology, was called the theology of the word because, in his experience of having to preach, he found he had nothing to say, and when you have nothing to say and you have to preach, you're in deep trouble. So, Barth began to study and he studied the Epistle to the Romans and after ten years of preaching in this village and working with a good friend, seriously wrestling with the faith, he published *The Epistle to the Romans*. It started such a stir that he was asked to come and speak about his theology to a ministers' conference. He was embarrassed by the very thought, and he said, "I don't have a theology. I have a theology just like it came to me, nurtured through my teachers until I had to preach, and then I needed something to say, and I began to study and think biblically and theologically in order for the sermon on Sunday morning."

You see, there's really nothing that is more important than this moment. Now, I said a moment ago that I recognize a variety of religious experience and more and more I have come to appreciate the aesthetic and the sacramental and the silence. That is so terribly important. Maybe God can even touch us more easily then, I don't know. Maybe it would be better if I would shut up, but for better or for worse, this is the moment of the sermon, this is the moment of the address of the word of God and I want to say to you it is a terribly important moment. Karl Barth recognized that his people were coming and he needed to have something to say, and he came to realize that all theology ought to be nothing more than in service of the sermon in order at this moment we can have something to say.

He speaks about Sunday morning, about the strange architecture of the place, the furniture, the appointments, and then the expectation. Oh, he recognizes that maybe someone came lazily, lollygagging in, not really expecting anything, and yet, he said, the whole situation speaks of expectation. Some event, some event in the past or perhaps in the future, some event, God is present. And then he says here is presumption, here is daring - one prays, someone begins to preach, and it's done on the conviction that God is present. That is what this moment is about - that God is present. Barth says the people come with a question, and the question is, "Is it true?" He says that the preacher had better understand people better than the people understand themselves. The preacher better know that down in the depths of the human heart and soul there's a question that says, "Is it true?" In other words, can I live with trust?

Can I believe, somehow or other in the midst of the world that has gone crazy with all of the darkness, where in Kosovo 14 farmers baling hay are shot at close range, where there continues to be this vengeful cycle of revenge, the violence where it's symptomatic of the human condition, where I look into the human soul, I look into my own heart and I see the darkness there, the compromise there. I see the ambiguity there. I see the self-centeredness there, I see all of that which keeps me from fulfilling that calling of God, that beckoning of the spirit.

Is it true? Is anything true? Is God at all here? Is God present? Can God be trusted? Is God involved at all in the world, in history, in nature, in my life?

Barth says that's what Sunday morning is all about. That's what this moment is all about. The people have come and even when they don't realize it, even when they just come because it's Sunday morning and haven't even thought about it, even when they come with very little conscious expectation, down deep in their heart, he says, there's a question - Is it true? Can God be trusted? Is God? Is it true? Karl Barth says Sunday morning is that moment in which all theology should be focused in order to give the preacher something to say and to be able to touch that deep place in the human heart where there's doubt and fear and anxiety, deep questions, where there's a cry, "Is it true?" That's what Sunday morning is all about.

I came across this work of Barth when I was in Europe and if I had ever been tempted at all, following post-graduate study, to go into the academic community, I think it was this piece plus Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers From Prison* that convinced me that this is the most important place in the world and this is the most important hour of the week, this hour, preaching. My God, it's important, people. Do you realize how important it is? Presumptuous. Daring. One flawed and failing human being trying to say a word that is the word of God. That's what Calvin understood it to be, and Barth, in following Calvin, clarified very, very nicely the three forms of the word of God, the center of it all the word made flesh: the word made flesh, the word of God embodied, and all of Israel's prophetic word, words of anticipation, and all of the apostolic witness following the word of recollection or remembrance. So, there's the word in flesh and the word written, but then, here's daring, the preached word, and the preached word is nothing more or less than the word of God updated for *this place* and *this time* and *this people*.

Even when we read Hosea's words, we're reading an 8<sup>th</sup> century prophet into which have been layered some 6<sup>th</sup> century words because the 8<sup>th</sup> century prophet became the text for a 6<sup>th</sup> century preacher, and the text now that we have in 1999 is the text of the word of God written out of the 8<sup>th</sup> century Before the Common Era, and the 6<sup>th</sup> century Before the Common Era, and here it is 1999 and it becomes the occasion for the preaching of the word in this place at this time, because the word preached is the updating of the word written that is spoken on the word in flesh, because Barth understood so clearly that *revelation is always an event*. You don't have revelation in a book; you don't have revelation in an institution; you don't have revelation in a confessional creed; the word of God speaks. *God* reveals God. Never at our disposal. Never to put in our pocket. Never for us to domesticate and have in a neat little box, packaged. The word of God will speak when God will speak, and when the human voice is speaking a word of address based on a written text pointing to the word in flesh, it just might happen. And it might not. It probably doesn't happen more often than it happens.

But, that's why this is such an electric moment. That's why this could potentially be a world turning upside down, transforming moment for someone, and who knows how it will happen, because the Spirit blows where it will. But when the word made flesh, witnessed to by the word written, becomes the text for a word of address, it just might happen. Even here and now someone might see a rift in the sky, someone whose burden is heavy might feel it lift, someone might see a light in the darkness, someone might feel themselves exposed, laid bare in all their selfishness compromised and all of the flawedness of their existence, someone might cry out, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner," someone might say, "I heard the voice today that said, 'I will heal your faithlessness; I'll never give you up.'"

I don't know how it happens, when it happens, but I know that it is absolutely serious and critical that it happens where we find an honest word today. Will you find it in the political arena? Why can we not pass campaign reform? Is it not

because our political system is for sale? Where has the word "spin doctor" come from? Do we believe anything we hear, or is it always something with a spin, or an ulterior motive satisfied by an ambition for human acquisition or aggrandizement, for the undercutting of something or other, for the setting up of a project or a person? Is there any truth in the land?

There had better be truth here. Do I presume to be one without bias or prejudice? Of course not. That's the presumption of preaching. But I had better not speak a word that I speak not consciously before the face of God. If there is to be truth to be told in the earth, then it must be told here, where there is nothing to gain, where there is no ulterior motive but the well-being of humankind and the glory of God and the mending of creation.

The religious right has joined the political game. Recently Ed Dobson of Calvary Udenominational, and Cal Thomas, the journalist, wrote a book about *Blinded By Power*, because when the Church gets enmeshed in those structures, then it has another agenda, then it can't tell the truth. Only the free pulpit and a free person who has nothing but the concern to speak a word from God is the salvation of the world. It is here that you can still hear a word of truth, in spite of the flawed nature of the voice, but the voice is tied to the text and points to the one, and your deep question, "Is it true?" can be answered from the written word that pointed to the word in flesh that lived out the fact, "Yes, it's true. God is love. A fierce love that will expose you only in order, finally, to heal you." I don't know of another stop along your way this week where you have a better chance of hearing the word of God than in this hour, and that's why you come, and it's that word in which you can trust, and by God, it's tough. It's presumptuous. It's daring, and it doesn't get any easier, because I take it so seriously, do you know that? God have mercy on us.