

The God Who Never Gives Up On Us

From the sermon series: God, Our Ally

Text: Hosea 11: 8-9, 32; Hosea 14: 4

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Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan

August 25, 1985

Transcription of the spoken sermon

God is our Ally.

He will never give up on us - not because finally we will come round and deserve His love, but rather because His love, flowing out of His own depths, will never let us go. That is the theme of this message: He will never give up on us; He will never let us go.

This is a message about the unconditional love of God. It is a message about what is translated from the Hebrew word *hesed* as God's "steadfast love." This is a message about God our Ally Who has called us into a covenant relationship to which He remains faithful even when we prove unfaithful. This message is a love story, the story of a love beyond compare, a love beyond human conception. This is the story of a love that will never give up, never let us go; a love that will finally heal us and bind us to the bosom of God.

The message comes from Hosea, a great Eighth Century B.C. prophet who experienced deep pain in his own marriage and therein discovered the pain of God at the unfaithfulness of His people Israel, but discovered something more amazing - that God's love is unquenchable.

The first three chapters of Hosea deal with biographical material from the prophet's own life. There has been much debate about the interpretation of these chapters. I cannot give you the whole discussion, but will summarize what I believe is the most adequate understanding of Hosea's experience. In Chapter 1:2, we read,

...The Lord said to Hosea, "Go, take to yourself a wife of harlotry, for the land commits great harlotry by forsaking the Lord."

This was probably a reflection after the fact. Hosea married Gomer and she proved unfaithful. The verse above summarizes what happened rather than indicating that Gomer was a harlot before Hosea married her. The first chapter

records Gomer's unfaithfulness. Although it is not clearly stated, it would appear that Hosea divorced Gomer because of her wantonness. (cf. Hosea 2:2a, 4-5a). Then in chapter 3:1, we read,

And the Lord said to me, "Go again, love a woman who is beloved of a paramour and is an adulteress; even as the Lord loves the people of Israel, though they turn to other gods..."

So, Hosea redeems Gomer - buys her back out of the bondage of her harlotry - and restores her as his wife. In his own experience, thus, he found a "lived parable" that pointed to the unquenchable love of God.

He was tormented by his separation from Gomer, he felt maimed and incomplete, and he realized that however little Gomer might deserve his love... yet she retained it to an undiminished degree, and he was constrained even against his own judgment to attempt to restore the old marriage relationship.

The mystery of the compulsive power of his own love for Gomer made Hosea reflect upon the love of God for erring Israel. It was thereon that he founded his message of hope for his people... (Interpreter Bible, Vol. VI, p. 562)

Martin Buber writes,

That a particular person should be bound to love another particular person in utter concreteness, is there such a thing as this? The word can only be spoken to one who already loves. He loves, he still loves the faithless one, he cannot suppress this love, but he does not want it, for he feels himself degraded by it. ...Into this state of soul God's word descends, "Continue loving, thou art allowed to love her, thou must love her; even so do I love Israel." (*The Prophetic Faith*, p. 113)

Hosea loved Gomer still. He redeemed her and brought her back. She did not deserve such love and grace.

But if Gomer did not deserve such merciful treatment as Hosea felt constrained to give her, no more did Israel merit the mercy and love of God. Her redemption from sin and shame was an act of God's grace and of his love that would not let her go. (Interpreter Bible, p. 562)

The statement of God's unconditional, unquenchable love is beautifully stated in the first verse of the eleventh chapter. Now the figure is not the marriage relationship, but that of God the Father and Israel the son.

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

But Israel was unfaithful; she worshipped the Canaanite gods. Tenderly, God nurtured her.

I led them with cords of compassion, with the bands of love... (11:4)

But still they failed to live faithfully in that covenant love. They succeeded only in eliciting God's anger. Judgment was surely coming; Hosea could feel it.

Hosea prophesied around 745 B.C. Jeroboam II had brought the Northern Kingdom to prosperity, but Hosea could see the dry rot in the soul of the nation. Judgment would come and judgment did come. In 721, the Assyrian Empire came in and overthrew Israel, dispersing the ten northern tribes.

But judgment was not the final word. Judgment was only a means to the end of finally bringing His people to their senses and causing them to return to Him. Listen to the "last word:"

*How can I give you up, O 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.
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. (11: 8-9)*

There you have the text, a text to ponder. There you have a statement of God's unconditional, unquenchable love, a love that will never give up on us, a love that will never let us go.

In God's relationship to Israel, we see mirrored His relationship to all nations.

God created the nation Israel in the event of the Exodus. Israel was a chosen nation. God elected Israel to be a representative people for all peoples. We cannot fathom the mystery of that choice, that election. It was not an election of one nation cutting off the rest of the nations, but the choosing of one on behalf of the rest. It was a particular choice with a universal purpose. Remember the call to Abraham:

...by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves. Genesis 12: 3

The basis of God's choice of Israel was simply love:

It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love upon you and chose you...but it is because the Lord loves you... Deuteronomy 7: 7-8

Israel was the representative of us all. Berkhof calls Israel God's "Experimental Garden." In her concrete history – thus in the arena of our history – it has been demonstrated that the human covenant partner will never prove faithful.

... in an experimental garden the soil and what can be done with it are tried out, so that other fields, to which these experiments are applicable, may benefit from it. ... in the Old Testament, Israel, in distinction from other nations, is more than once pictured as a specially cultivated and tended vineyard, from which might thus be expected a greater yield, but whose unproductivity arouses the greater anger of God. (*Christian Faith*, p. 245)

Pointing to Israel's election, Berkhof shows that as a People she had a special privilege and a special task; the outcome of the Old Testament is the demonstration in our history of the faithlessness of the human covenant partner and the faithfulness of the Divine covenant partner. Berkhof writes,

And we who are witnesses of this way know that Israel is no better or worse than the other nations, but that her guilt and fate disclose the way of the whole human race. The abiding relevance of the Old Testament is that the experimental garden Israel has shown once and for all how unfruitful we humans are in our faithfulness to God and our neighbor; and then, too, how unimaginably faithful God remains to mankind which ever and again seeks life apart from him. (p. 245f)

What is the solution? Certainly there is no hope from our side; there is no solution possible from the human covenant partner. When God moved to effect a solution through the gift of Jesus in whom He dwelt in fullness, we crucified him. This is the New Testament history that corresponds to Israel's failure. Thus we have in both Old and New Testaments the concrete history of radical human guilt.

What is the solution? The solution is the radical grace of God, which flows from the unconditional love of God. It was this insight that gripped Hosea, written indelibly in his own soul through his personal experience. God says, in effect, "You deserve to be given up; I should give you up. But how can I give you up? I will not give you up."

In his book *Unconditional Love*, John Powell writes,

In the Old Testament God reveals himself to the People of Israel as a God of unconditional love. His gift of himself in the choice and creation of "My People" is totally unsolicited, undeserved and unmerited. ... God decides, God chooses, God offers his gift of love. He is by his own free act forever committed to his People. The prophet Hosea uses the image of God taking a bride: "And I will betroth you to me forever." (2:19-20) Through the prophet Isaiah, God says, "Even if a mother should forget the child of her womb, I will never forget you." (49:15).

The unconditionality of God's love for his People is a constant refrain in the Old Testament. God has promised and God will always be faithful to his promise. Jeremiah writes of God's constant willingness to forgive: "With an eternal love I have loved you. Therefore, in loving-kindness I draw you to myself." (31:3) (*Unconditional Love*, p. 97F)

Hosea understood the faithfulness of God to his covenant which was rooted in a love that would never give up. As Bernard Anderson writes,

Just as Gomer played the harlot, so Israel had broken the covenant. According to Hosea, this was the real historical tragedy, and all the contemporary troubles of Israel were only symptoms of it. The "wife" whom Yahweh had chosen and betrothed to himself had become a whore. A "spirit of hostility" had inflamed the people, and they had become estranged from their God. (4:12) Hosea's critique of Israel's society went far deeper than a mere condemnation of social immorality, political confusion, or religious formation. He was concerned with men's motives, with the devotion of the heart, with the things in which men place their trust. (*Understanding The Old Testament*, p. 247)

Sounding the keynote of Hosea's message, Anderson writes,

The deepest note struck in the book of Hosea is the proclamation that God's "wrath" or judgment is redemptive. God's purpose is not to destroy, but to heal. Through historical crises that shake the very foundations of human self-sufficiency, Yahweh acts to free his people from their enslavement to false allegiance and to restore them to freedom in the covenant loyalty. Just as Hosea's love was greater and deeper than Gomer's infidelity, so Yahweh's love for Israel is truly steadfast. It is a divine love that will not let his people go, despite their fickleness and harlotry. His "wrath" is not capricious, vindictive, and destructive; it is the expression of a holy love which seeks to break the chains of Israel's bondage and to emancipate her for a new life, a new covenant. (*Ibid.*, p. 251)

... divine judgment is not the last word ... (verses 8-9). For even in the hour of catastrophe Yahweh does not abandon his people, nor does his love for them cease. It is not his will that Israel be destroyed as Admah and Zeborn were leveled during the holocaust of Sodom and Gomorrah, (cf. Gen. 19:24-25; Deuteronomy 29:23). Rather, the purpose behind Yahweh's judgment is love, like that of a parent who lovingly disciplines a wayward child. These verses passionately describe a struggle, as it were, within the heart of God - a struggle that doubtless reflects the agony of Hosea's experience with Gomer. But the triumph is on the side of the love that will not let Israel go. (*Ibid.*, p. 252)

Thus Hosea ends his prophecy with words of healing,

I will heal their apostasy; of my own bounty will I love them. (14:4)

The secret of such love lies in God. We cannot fathom it; we can only bow before its majesty. It is beyond human comprehension. God points to His own "Godness" as it were, differentiating Himself from us.

... for I am God and not man.

Such is the amazing story of the love of God.

It is interesting to relate Hosea's sense of God's love that never gives up on us to Paul's struggle with Israel's rejection of Jesus. Romans chapters 9-11 relate that struggle. Paul cannot understand how to put together God's faithfulness to his covenant promise with Israel's disobedience. His final conclusion is that, through Israel's rejection, the Gospel is being brought to the Gentiles. He concludes that section of struggle with these words:

For in making all mankind prisoners to disobedience, God's purpose was to show mercy to all mankind. (11:32)

Then he breaks out in a great doxology, praising the God of so great salvation.

What are we to make of this amazing love story, this tale of unconditional, unquenchable love? Must it not seem too good to be true? If it seems too good to be true, it is because we are not accustomed to hearing this message stated simply and straightforwardly. As the message has come to us filtered through centuries of Church tradition - our own Church tradition included - the message has been garbled and the unconditional love of God has been hedged in with numerous qualifications and conditions. I think it accurate to say that for the most part the message that has come through is that of a conditional love of God, conditional on our response, conditional on our good behavior. We speak much of grace, but we operate on the basis of good works and self-righteousness.

Is it not perhaps that we are afraid to let the truth of the radical grace and unconditional love of God out because people might really believe it and presume upon it, take advantage of it? Do we dare tell people that the love of God will finally overcome their disobedience, their unfaithfulness, their unworthiness, their fickleness, in a word - their sinful rebellion and self assertion?

Do we not rather make God's gift of salvation conditional on saying the right words, confessing the right beliefs, conforming to accepted morality?

Have we not transformed the Gospel of God's radical grace and unconditional love into a morality game? Has not the message of the Church been strongly flavored with "Santa Claus theology" - that is - not "You better be good 'cause Santa's coming to town," but "You better be good 'cause Jesus is coming again?"

That is so very human, just like us. We use reward and punishment on our children; good behaviour gets a reward; bad behaviour gets punishment. That seems only reasonable; that seems like a just mode of operation.

Is that not also the way God operates? The answer is simply, "No."

Is that not why when He makes His amazing declaration about not being able to give up on Israel, He explains,

...for I am God and not man.

Similarly in Isaiah 55 we read after the gracious invitation to return to Him Who freely forgives,

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not my ways... For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts; and as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return until they have watered the earth, making it blossom and bear fruit, and give seed for sowing and bread to eat, so shall the word which comes from my mouth prevail; it shall not return to me fruitless without accomplishing my purpose or succeeding in the task I gave it. (Isaiah 55:8-11)

God is God. God is other than we are. In His dealings, Love always triumphs. God will never give up on His People. His anger burns. His judgment falls. But His love wins out and the last word is grace.

We hardly dare let this good news be known for we fear then we will lose our hold on persons, we will lose our control factor. A good dose of threat and a pinch of fear, the reinforcement of the guilt that is present and well deserved tends to keep the Church in the driver's seat and the people subservient and docile. What would happen if we really let it out that God's love is the final reality, the last word?

A great Christian leader and spiritual giant of an earlier day, A.W. Tozer, wrote a beautiful essay entitled, "God Is Easy To Live With." He writes,

Satan's first attack upon the human race was his sly effort to destroy Eve's confidence in the kindness of God. Unfortunately for her and for us he succeeded too well. From that day, men have had a false conception of God, and it is exactly this that has cut out from under them the ground of righteousness and driven them to reckless and destructive living. (These Times, 1-74, p. 10)

He points out how our notion of God must always determine the quality of our religion. Instinctively we try to be like our God and if He is conceived to be stern and exacting, so will we ourselves be. We can speak of salvation by grace, but we reduce the glory of the Gospel to the drudgery of legalism. Tozer goes on:

From a failure properly to understand God comes a world of unhappiness among good Christians even today. The Christian life is thought to be a glum, unrelieved cross-carrying under the eye of a stern Father who expects much and excuses nothing.

If we think of Him as cold and exacting we shall find it impossible to love Him, and our lives will be ridden with servile fear. ... The truth is that God is the most winsome of all beings and His service one of unspeakable pleasure. He is all love, and those who trust Him never know anything but that love.

Unfortunately, many Christians cannot get free from their perverted notions of God, and these notions poison their hearts and destroy their inward freedom. These friends serve God grimly, as the elder brother did, doing what is right without enthusiasm and without joy, and seem altogether unable to understand the buoyant, spirited celebration when the prodigal comes home. Their idea of God rules out the possibility of His being happy in His people, ... Unhappy souls, these, doomed to go heavily on their melancholy way, grimly determined to do right if the heavens fall and to be on the winning side in the day of judgment.

We please Him most, not by frantically trying to make ourselves good, but by throwing ourselves into His arms with all our imperfections and believing that He understands everything and loves us still.

Tozer had read Hosea. He makes such an important point. It is precisely the knowledge of God's unconditional love that has the power to change us inside out.

What have we produced in so much of the history of the Church? Not happy, grace-full persons, but fearful, guilt-ridden persons whose external conformity to the Law is a mask over seething hostility and rebellious resentment.

James Sandeishas written a book with the interesting title, *God Has a Story Too*. He points out that the Bible is a story about God's action first of all, not about human reaction. He argues that we moralize the Bible when we should theologize the life. By this he means that the biblical narratives are stories not about human achievements, human obedience, human goodness. We are not given a series of models to emulate in the Bible. Abraham lied about Sarah being his wife and laughed when God said they would have a child. Moses murdered and was a fugitive from justice. David was guilty of murder and adultery. Paul persecuted the Church. Peter denied Jesus.

The Bible is the story of what God can do through the likes of such people - in spite of them. The story is God's story - a love story, a story of a love that never quits, a love that never gives up on us, a love that will never let us go.

Thus when we become wiser than God, feel we must guard the morality of persons and keep their religious practice in line by qualifying the burning passion of His unquenchable love, we not only distort the amazing wonder of that love, we also miss the greatest single catalyst for transforming human personality and the greatest motivation for a life of trust and devotion lived in the light of His grace.

Moralism produces self-righteous, proud and judgmental persons. Legalism produces tense, guilty persons lacking joy and assurance in the freedom of grace. Stressing a conditional acceptance produces fear and finally despair. In a word, the shading of the truth of God's love that knows no limits simply backfires; it does not accomplish the purpose. It does not work.

In a quarter century of pastoral ministry, I must say that it is grace that is most difficult to receive and God's unconditional love that is most difficult to believe.

We do not deserve it.
We know we do not deserve it.
We are guilty people and we know it.
We despair of ourselves; why wouldn't God despair?
We condemn ourselves; why wouldn't God condemn?
We are faithless and fickle;
 we resolve, we perform, we fall away again,
 we have done it a thousand times;
 will the pattern ever be broken?

And here is the greatest peril of spiritual existence: We despair and give up. Rather than responding to the call of the higher, we give up and yield to the lower.

We write ourselves off: "Hopeless Case."

The old Baptismal liturgy contains great insight and wisdom. Explaining the meaning of the sacrament, it teaches that -

Baptism is a sign and seal of our ingrafting into the body of Christ... By this assurance we are called to new obedience: to hold fast to this one God, ... to trust and love him with all our heart and soul and mind and strength; and to forsake the world, crucify our old nature, and walk in a new and holy life.

Fine. That is what we are committed to. But who can realize that high calling? The Saints, right? Abraham, Moses, David, Peter and Paul? Maybe the Elders. Maybe even the Deacons.

But that holy life is hardly within the range of ordinary mortals, is it? Maybe for some. Some folks seem full of goodness and steadiness and from all outward

appearance it would seem they are walking the straight and narrow. But as for me ...

Then our liturgy comes with profound spiritual insight:

And if we sometimes, through weakness, fall into sin, we must not therefore despair of God's mercy, nor continue in sin, since Baptism is the sign and seal of God's eternal covenant of grace with us.

There you have it! Again, the liturgy does not at the point of our weakness issue a warning, but reminds us of a promise. It does not focus on what we ought to be, but on what God has already established. Baptism is a sign and seal of *an Eternal Covenant of Grace*.

That Eternal Covenant of Grace flows from the heart of the Eternal God, which is Love; unquenchable love, unconditional love, love that will not quit, love that will not give up on us, love that will never let us go. Radical grace. Radical love. That is mind-boggling. If that is Who God is, then He is easy to live with, easy to love, a joy to serve, a delight to please.

God is our Ally. He will never give up on us. His love will finally triumph. I do not know how; sometimes through judgment, sometimes through adversity, sometimes through death. That is His prerogative; for us the "how" remains a mystery. But the "that" is clear: Love is the last word. God is love.

He will never give up on *you*!

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