“Not So Minor Prophets:
2) Hosea”

a sermon by

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Charlotte, North Carolina

June 13, 2010

Text: “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.” (Hosea 11:1-2)

Over the four Sundays of June we are looking at the “Minor Prophets,” those twelve prophets who derive the somewhat misleading name of “Minor” not out of lack of importance, but simply for the fact of brevity. The books that bear their name are short in length.

This past Sunday we looked at Amos. This morning we are looking at the prophet Hosea, who was a contemporary of Amos. Both of these prophets engaged in prophecy during the 8th Century B.C., before the destruction of the Northern Kingdom in 721 B.C. by the Assyrians.

I.

One of the characteristics of the prophets is that the role of the prophet was most often a great burden. There are many people today who call themselves prophets, but in fact, being a prophet was for the most part a very difficult vocation. Jeremiah is often referred to as a man of “deep sorrow and grief,” who died outside his homeland. Ezekiel was viewed by many of his contemporaries as insane. Often he would act out his message by walking through the streets wearing only a loin cloth, his actions a witness that Israel would be carried off to exile. Jonah was caught up in a terrible storm at sea, and according to the narrative of the Book of Jonah, lived for three days in the belly of a whale. So when Jesus said that “a prophet is not without honor except in his home town,” he certainly spoke the truth. The prophets were often called to bear terrible burdens and often suffered greatly in their private lives.

This was certainly true of the prophet Hosea. In his life there was a painful but intimate connection between his personal life and his prophecy. In Chapters 1-3 we read the rather startling words that God called this particular prophet to take as a wife a woman who was a prostitute. So, Hosea married a woman whose name was Gomer, who bore him three children. But Gomer was an unfaithful

wife who cheated on her husband Hosea. As such, she was a symbol of Israel's faithfulness to the promises and commandments of God. In the case of Hosea, God called him to live out in his personal life the message of his prophecy. Even as his wife was unfaithful to him, so Israel was unfaithful to God by chasing after other Gods and worshiping the "Baals" of the Canaanite religion.

II.

There is also another very powerful way that the imagery of the family is used to speak of the relationship between prophet and people. In Hosea, chapter 11, God speaks of his relationship to his people as of a father to a son.

> "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son." (Hosea 11:1)
> "Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk,
> I took them in my arms;
> I bent down to feed them." (Hosea 11:3-5)

In this instance God is pictured as a nurturing father who teaches his son to walk, who feeds him and holds him.

In the instance of the unfaithful wife, the prophet Hosea is called to receive his unfaithful wife back to himself. In the case of the wayward son, God declares that he cannot give up on a wayward son, no matter how often the son strays from him.

In a remarkable way Hosea combines the judgment of God with God's unfailing love and as such is a powerful witness of the forgiveness of God.

III.

It is hard to speak of the Christian gospel without speaking of God's forgiveness of sin. Reinhold Niebuhr once spoke of God's grace as God's forgiveness of our sin.

But forgiveness is not easy. Once when Jesus healed a man who was paralyzed, he said to that man, "Your sins are forgiven. Take up your bed and walk." (Mark 2:9) When the Scribes who were present at this healing questioned Jesus' authority to forgive sins, Jesus replied by saying, "Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven', or to say, 'Stand up and take your bed and walk'?"

Sometimes we talk about forgiveness, as if it were an easy matter. So often when someone wrongs us, we say, "Don't worry, it doesn't matter." In those cases, we are not forgiving sin, we are condoning it. And that is an altogether different matter. To say that sin does not matter, to make light of it and to be gracious and tolerant about it – there is plenty of that. But that is not forgiveness. That is moral looseness. Sin does matter – tremendously. To condone sin is easy; to forgive it is hard.

Harry Emerson Fosdick once spoke of two very different kinds of parents. Some parents lack moral depth. A superficial affectionateness distinguishes their parenting. When a child wanders from home and becomes a prodigal, they will receive the child, condoning the sin, say it does not matter, making more excuses for the child than the child could ever make for himself.

But some of us had parents who were not that way. They would have forgiven us, but it would have been a heartbreaking experience for them. They would have borne upon themselves the outrage of our sin as if they had committed it themselves. They would have gone with us to the gateway of any hell we turned our feet toward, and stood grief stricken at the door until we came out. They would have put themselves in our place, lived in our stead, and felt upon their innocence the burden of our guilt. They would have forgiven us, but it would have turned their hair gray. That is forgiveness. It always means self-substitution. The person who forgives gives himself. And it is never easy.

Therefore, when the gospel speaks of forgiveness, it never invites us to a light-hearted place where sins are condoned. It has called us to a cross, for the cross says to us that it was hard to forgive, that forgiveness inevitably means sacrifice. To say the Christ died to forgive our sins is to say that it was hard for God to forgive.

But that is always the cost of forgiveness. It is someone putting themselves in our place, bearing on their innocence the burden of our guilt. For whether a husband forgives a wife or a wife forgives a husband, whether a parent forgives a child or God forgives us, there is always a cross at the center of it, and it is never easy.

IV.

There is another dimension to forgiveness and it is that forgiveness comes to us as God's gift in Jesus Christ. It is not something that any of us can earn.

No one understood this better that the great Reformer Martin Luther. As a young man, Luther was haunted with a sense of God's holiness and Luther's own sense of unworthiness. Luther tried hard to win God's love. He entered the monastery. He spent weeks repenting of his sin and fasting. He made pilgrimages, prayed to the saints and performed every ritual possible to earn God's love, but he was always afraid that it was never enough.

It was the study of Scripture that finally brought to Luther the peace he so desperately needed. In his study of the Psalms, Galatians, and Romans, he read the words of Paul who wrote, "The just shall live by faith." He discovered one of the great truths of the gospel. Salvation is God's gift to us that comes by grace through faith. We cannot and do not earn it. We can only receive it by our faith in what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

In the New Testament the real chasm between human beings is not between rich or poor, slave or free, male or female, or the powerful and the oppressed. The real divide in the New Testament is between those who believed they were righteous and those who knew they were sinners. The gospel is always directed toward those who understand that they are sinners in need of God's grace. There is no gospel for the "righteous" because they have no sense of their need of God's grace. Jesus said, "I have come to call not the righteous, but sinners."

There are two important things we can learn from this. The first is that Jesus could only help those who knew they were sinners. The second is that only those who know they are sinners, those who have received mercy, can show mercy.

V.

A final dimension to God's forgiveness is that God overcomes the separation that sets us apart from God, from neighbor and from ourselves.

Paul Tillich, in his book *The Shaking of the Foundations,* once observed that two of the most difficult words in our language are the words "sin" and "grace." And they are two of the most important words of our faith.

Sin is our separation from God. It is the realization that we are cut off from the one who created us. It is the sense we have that there is something missing in our lives, something that we cannot describe. Often we have a vague sense of guilt or meaningless because our lives are not what we know they should be. As Paul put it, "The good that I would do, I do not do, and the evil that I do not wish to do, I do." (Romans 7)

But we are separated from other people as well. Who of us has not found himself lonely even in the midst of a gathering of people? So often we cannot break through the walls that separate us from the ones we love: wives from husbands, husbands from wives, parents from children.

But we are also separated from ourselves as well. Dr. Karl Menninger, a famous psychiatrist, wrote a book entitled *Man Against Himself* in which he described the phenomenon of the separation that is inside each of us. We often condemn self-hatred, but it is not self-love that is so pervasive as is self-hatred. It is this mixture of selfishness and self-hate that often prevents us from loving other people. The person who is unable to love himself is unable to love others as well. The person who loves himself is the person who is able to love others as well. It is only when we learn to overcome self-contempt that we can overcome our contempt for others.

It was the Apostle Paul who reminded us that "where sin abounded, grace did much more abound." I do not think that Paul said these words because of some sentimental instinct or even to try to give a happy ending for everything that is tragic in life. He said that because they describe the most powerful and overwhelming event in his life. In the picture of Jesus as the Christ, which appeared to him at the moment of his greatest separation from other people, from himself, and from God, he found himself accepted in spite of his being rejected. And when he found that he was accepted by God, he was able to accept himself and to be reconciled with God and with other people as well.

There is no more important dimension of the Christian gospel than the forgiveness of sin. It was this forgiveness that allowed the prophet Hosea to receive an unfaithful wife to himself. It was this forgiveness that allowed God to forgive his people Israel and to receive them to himself, though they had wandered after other gods.

I wonder how many of us today, if we were honest, would acknowledge that there is not some unforgiven sin in our lives.

If that is true, then go down to that secret place. Unlock that secret door. Take out that unforgiven sin. For your soul's sake, get rid of it! But there is only one way: it is the way of the cross – penitence, confession, restitution, pardon.

Amen!