

July 24, 2022
"Gospel of Generosity and Grace"
Hosea 1:2-10 / Luke 11:1-13
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

If you joined us for worship on Easter Sunday this year, you may recall that I told a story on my younger self. My fifth-grade self, to be specific.

Well, I got another one for you this morning. When I was in 7th grade, I think, maybe 8th, I went on an overnight Christian retreat with some friends from my school, and a bunch of middle school kids from the wider area. The retreat was held at a nearby college, and it was mostly led by students at the college.

Needless to say, it felt pretty sweet to be staying on a college campus, hanging out with college students. We were divided into small groups, and I remember – in particular – one female small-group leader. You can imagine the thrill for my socially awkward but nonetheless hormonally charged, heterosexual 13- or 14-year-old self, eager to impress.

For the record, we had two small-group leaders; I don't remember the other one. But the reason I don't remember him and I do remember her is not what you might think.

At one point during the retreat we did a team relay race, all the small groups pitted against each other. We were in the gym where the college basketball teams played, an extra thrill for me as an aspiring player myself. I was extra eager to impress.

Each leg of the relay race involved a different challenge. Mine involved giving the aforementioned female small-group leader a piggy-back ride across the full length of the gym, and back – with the additional challenge of spinning around a few times in the middle. Both ways. And again, all while racing other teams doing the same thing.

I could not have drawn up the scenario any better myself. But things did not go as planned. When it was our turn, I made it, WE made it, one direction and were on our way back to the start – but when I spun around in the middle, I lost my balance and the aforementioned female small-group leader went flying over top of me, face-first. Landed on her face, in fact. There was blood. They had to take her to the ER. Everything

happened so fast. I was devastated, of course, humiliated, and as embarrassed as I've ever been in my life.

That's partly why I remember her all these years later. But much more than that, I remember her because she eventually came back. She chipped a tooth and had to get stitches in her mouth, but she came back. She rejoined our small group like nothing had happened, and she gave me a hug I will never forget.

I don't remember what she said, but I know this: she offered me grace. I remember grace. We remember grace when we are on the receiving end of it.

Grace and generosity, which tend to occupy the same space. Hand in hand, peas in a pod. Grace and generosity are what we find in our scripture texts this morning.

I feel like I need to start with the text from Hosea, as John just read for us. What one commentator calls an "abrasive text." It's kind of hard to read, kind of hard to hear, starting with the reference to "whoredom." Or harlotry. Prostitution.

God, as presented, instructs Hosea, one of 12 so-called "minor" prophets in Hebrew scriptures, to marry – or as more precisely translated, to "take yourself a wife of whoredom" and "have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD." If you've never come across the word "whoredom" in your life, you have now.

The text is problematic on at least a few misogynistic levels. You see it in:

- the cultural norm, from the start, of taking a woman as property
- you see it in the portrayal of a prostitute, a woman, as the archetypal sinner. Prostitute, adulterer, the archetype is found throughout the prophets and throughout the scriptures, including in Jesus' time; and in this case, presented as a metaphor for Israel's faithlessness as God's people, Israel's ongoing disregard for the covenant, Israel's promiscuousness with other gods – in particular, in Hosea's context, the god Baal, the Canaanite storm god, believed to be the source of rain and fertility.

- and you also find misogyny in the overarching portrayal of God as jealous and punishing in relationship, especially as you read on in Hosea – mimicking the patterns and cycles of spousal abuse, “the movement,” as one commentator describes it, “from offended, punishing and shaming husband to the alluring words seeking to restore the relationship.”

The metaphor, Hosea’s prophecy, is deeply problematic and there’s no way around that. But the intention remains to present God as the faithful, but aggrieved, husband of a faithless wife. Faithful God of the covenant in complicated relationship with the faithless people of Israel.

Whether historical or purely figurative we don’t know, but Hosea does as God apparently instructs, marrying Gomer – though we’re not told anything about how she fits the category of prostitute. They have three children together, all symbolically named to represent God’s displeasure with Israel: Jezreel, meaning “God sows” – as in, God will sow punishment, break the bow of Israel; Lo-ruhamah, meaning “Not pitied”; and Lo-ammi, meaning “Not my people” – “for you are not my people and I am not your God.”

Again, this naming portrays God as jealous and punishing, but we need to understand it within the thread of prophetic literature. Remember that the Hebrew prophets are calling God’s people back to covenant, again and again and again back to relationship with the Divine. What is presented, and so often understood, as God’s punishment is better understood, theologically, as the inevitable, felt consequences of faithlessness, of rejection of the covenant.

As chapter four in Hosea describes it, “There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land. Swearing, lying and murder, and stealing and adultery break out; bloodshed follows bloodshed. Therefore the land mourns, and all who live in it languish, together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing.”

There is no need for God to judge or punish because the people of Israel have brought on their own judgment and punishment. We bring on our own judgment and punishment, and live with the all-too-real consequences of our own individual and collective choices – for ourselves, for each other, for the land – when we turn away from the covenant. The covenant, remember, that Jesus summed up as love of God and neighbor and self.

When we turn away from that covenant, we are not, in fact, living as God's people or as if the God of Love is our God. The symbolic name, Lo-ammi, "not my people" is a designation we bring on ourselves. By choices we make, not God.

Prophets call us to account for the unkind and unjust consequences of our individual and collective choices, our actions AND our inactions. Prophets call us to repentance, to turn around, to turn back to the covenant. To God. To each other. To ourselves. To the better way. To turn back to love and justice. To that which is life-giving for all, to live as God's people.

I believe with all of my heart, because I REFUSE to believe otherwise, no matter how our sacred texts may sometimes come off, that God is wholly in what immediately FOLLOWS the harsh pronouncement, the painful realization that we are not living as God's people, not living as if the God of Love is indeed our God.

Hear it in verse 10: "Yet," YET, "the number of the people of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which can be neither measured nor numbered; and in the place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' it shall be said to them, 'Children of the living God.'"

Hear that good news, that gospel truth. Where it was said to them 'You are not my people,' it shall be said to them, 'Children of the living God.' The divine presence is not one of judgment and punishment, but of generosity and grace. You may live, you may act, you may speak, you may choose as if you are not my people and I am not your God, and you, we, have to live with those consequences, but "Children of the living God."

You may feel like you don't belong, like you're not part of the family, but "Children of the living God." You are ALWAYS, always children of the living God. You always belong.

That is the divine generosity and grace that, as Anne Lamott writes, "meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us." That, she says, is "unearned love—the love that goes before, that greets us on the way."

The steadfastness of God's love, in covenant relationship, is the moral of the story here. Faithful as we may or may not be, as Marilynne Robinson puts it, "Love is holy because it is like grace – the worthiness of its object is never really what matters."

And grace, as the U2 song we just heard suggests, "travels outside of karma," outside of what we "deserve," and "finds goodness, finds beauty in everything." "Makes beauty" even "out of ugly things."

Grace invites us back to life, to ourselves, to each other, to what we actually need, to what matters. As we saw last week, Jesus offered Martha grace, not judgment; inviting her to listen within herself, among the many distractions, for the one thing that mattered in that moment. Trusting that it would not be taken from her.

Which brings me, briefly, to our other scripture text.

Following that story of Martha and Mary, we get Luke's description of what we know as the "Lord's Prayer" – Jesus' response to his disciples asking him to teach them to pray. It's a shorter version; the full version many of us know, even learned by heart as kids, is found in Matthew.

Beyond offering the model for prayer, Jesus goes on to add a parable about prayer. Say you go to a friend, someone you know, to borrow some bread to share with an unexpected visitor. It's late, your friend is asleep and yells out from inside, "Don't bother me. I can't help you."

But the parable goes on because the lesson of the parable is persistence. "I tell you," Jesus says, "even though he will not get up and give you anything because he is your friend, at least because of your persistence he will get up and give you whatever he

needs." Biblical scholars suggest that the Greek word translated here as persistence, *anaideia*, is more precisely translated as "shamelessness." The kind of boldness that comes with familiarity.

You have nothing to lose, Jesus says. Have no shame, be bold, in asking for what you NEED. With anyone, and all the more with God. Doing so honors the relationship, affirms the intimacy of relationship with God and each other. Even in relationship with ourselves, knowing and asking for what we NEED. Deep down.

He goes on with the well-known refrain, the one we sang our way in with this morning, "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened."

That doesn't mean, of course, that we'll get everything we want; God is not a genie in a bottle. That's not what prayer is. But nonetheless, you can't get what you don't ask for. Search for.

This is simply an invitation to stay in honest, open and intimate relationship with the living God, trusting that God is generous, that God means to provide what you need. Your daily bread. Our daily bread.

As Thomas Merton once wrote, "Grace is not a strange, magic substance which is subtly filtered into our souls like spiritual penicillin. Grace is unity, oneness with ourselves, oneness with God."

None of us would give a child a snake if they ask for a fish, Jesus says, or a scorpion if they ask for an egg. So how much more will God, the divine Spirit of unconditional Love that flows within and between and beyond us, give to those who ask, who seek, who knock.

God's door is always open. The door to God's kingdom is always open, waiting for us to come through. This, friends, is the gospel of generosity and grace. And God knows, as

we all do, that the world desperately needs more generosity and grace. If only the world, the church, were marked by generosity and grace.

We mimic, don't we, the God, or the gods, we believe in? Our lives reflect, our worlds reflect, accordingly. And so we, as people of the Way, as fellow children of the living God, the God who is Love itself, the God of generosity and grace, not judgment and punishment, are called to pay forward that generosity and grace, to err on the side of generosity and grace.

"We should give as we would receive," writes Sydney Harris, "cheerfully, quickly and without hesitation; for there is no grace in a benefit that sticks to the fingers."

Given freely as freely received. Thanks be to God. May it be so.