

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC  
July 31, 2016

**“The Recoiling Heart of God”**

**“... My heart recoils within me;  
my compassion grows warm and tender.”  
Hosea 11:8**

**Prelude**

Our scripture reading this morning  
comes to us from the prophet Hosea.

When I was a young man receiving  
instruction (confirmation), the books  
of the Old Testament were grouped into categories,  
with different writings classified as  
**historical, poetic, or prophetic.**

This three-fold classification of Old Testament scripture  
was already in place in the formative stages  
of the Christian movement, where we find  
reference to Moses, the prophets, and the  
psalms (see Luke 24:44).

The Jewish faith maintains a similar  
Three-fold division of Hebrew scripture,  
referring to the Law, the Prophets,  
and the Writings, or TaNaK, an acronym  
signifying *Torah, Nebi'im, and Kethubim.*

Within the prophetic writings,  
Hosea is often listed as one of the  
“Latter Prophets” or “Minor Prophets.”  
This is an unfortunate and misleading term.  
It was initially a descriptive term intended  
to describe quantity of material,  
the relative **“brevity of the books,”**  
as compared to the volume of material

associated with the likes of  
Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel.

The size or quantity of material is not  
indicative of significance, and this is especially  
true of a prophet like Hosea.

Hosea was active in 8th century B.C.E.,  
(750-700 B.C.E.), which was a  
heightened period of prophetic activity.  
The first Isaiah, along with Amos and Micah  
also were active in this period.

You may be familiar with Hosea  
without knowing it. When Jesus speaks:  
**“For I desire steadfast love and not  
sacrifice, the knowledge of God,  
rather than burnt offerings”** (Hosea 6:6),  
he is speaking what first was spoken  
by Hosea.

The proverbial teaching, which we find  
in the writings of Paul and others,  
that you reap what you sow,  
is embedded in the thought of Hosea.  
**“Sow ... righteousness;  
reap ... love”**  
(Hosea 10:12; see II Corinthians 9:10).  
Which has a contemporary parallel:  
If you want peace,  
work for justice.

Another common strain in Hosea:  
**“Hold fast to love and justice,  
and wait continually for your God”**  
(Hosea 12:6).

When we find ourselves employing such language,  
or praying with such a mindset - we are acting as  
conservators of a prophetic tradition that reaches

deep into the heritage of our spiritual past,  
to the first chapters, the rise of what  
Karl Jaspers called the “**axial age**,” when new  
ways of thinking and relating to the world  
emerged in various cultures, with striking  
parallel, on our planet.

Hosea may best be known due to the  
domestic dysfunction of his personal life.  
Hosea’s wife was Gomer, and it was a  
troubled marriage.

Gomer was not faithful.  
Gomer did not reciprocate  
    Hosea’s love.  
Gomer played around.  
Gomer violated the trust  
    of the marital bond.

The language is plain and pointed  
    when describing Gomer’s behavior,  
giving rise to personal dilemma most  
    trying and stressful.  
The love of Hosea’s life does not  
    display a love  
        of Hosea.  
And children get involved.  
And God gets involved.  
A Divine directive is issued that is so  
    extreme - so seemingly unimaginable -  
that it challenges our ability to sort out  
exactly what was going on. Hosea is told to  
love the woman who has lovers (note the plural)  
    other than her betrothed.

As we read about Hosea and Gomer,  
the lines get blurred, and seemingly they overlap.

Will Hosea follow through,  
be faithful in the face of infidelity;  
be steadfast in maintaining love  
in the face of multiple indiscretions?

Will God's love be steadfast for Israel  
whose "delights" are so blatantly contemptuous  
of the One whose love has made their  
lives possible?

Or will Divine indignation turn fierce;  
will Love spurned turn  
to burn and destroy?

Hosea, it has been said, "**is the prophet of love**"  
(Eugene Peterson). But we must proceed with  
extreme caution. The love we encounter in Hosea  
is not airbrushed fantasy - all pleasure, no pain,  
no consequences.

Eugene Peterson notes most love stories  
are lies and deceptions. It would be more  
accurate he notes to speak of  
of "lust stories, sex fantasy stories, domination  
stories" (see *The Message*, p. 436). This is how  
love gets packaged in our culture.

But not so in Hosea.  
God's love, Hosea's love, blur and blend;  
they show us a love that suffers for the sake  
of the beloved, the Lover in pursuit, not when  
all is right, but when all is not. Such love seeks  
us when we are lost, not yet found, when we  
are adrift, at our end, at our worst.

If we can in some way grasp this love  
that is at work in Hosea,  
if we can absorb the story, its meaning, its truth,  
its power, "**we will know God more accurately.**"

According to Peterson: **“We will be on our way to being cured of all the sentimentalized and neurotic distortions of love that incapacitate us from dealing with the God who loves us and loving the neighbors who don’t love us”** (*The Message*, p. 436).

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Hosea, chapter 11; a chapter said by one scholar (H.D. Berry, *Hosea*, p. 140) that penetrates **“deeper into the heart and mind of God than anywhere else in the Old Testament.”**

We find here a divine soliloquy,  
God speaking with God,  
reflecting, musing over past, present, future.  
Israel was so loved as a child;  
and God was so generous:  
gentle, kind, nurturing; the Benevolent;  
the defender, protector; the fierce and tender  
Mother lover.

Yet Israel was so rebellious.  
What is one to do?  
Correct the child  
that the child might cease and desist  
from profligate, destructive behaviors  
that reject the Lover who is Giver and  
Sustainer of life.

The Child, though, is incorrigible;  
a habitual offender.  
Will the Loving God abandon ...  
turn away ... give up on those  
that are bound to be wayward?  
Will the Loving God give in to anger,  
and act to destroy those so  
brazen in disregard?

It is a heart rendering drama that unfolds in Hosea - what is God to do? It is a divine dilemma that begs to be resolved.

**“Mine heart is turned within me,  
my repenting are kindled together.”**  
KJV

**“My heart recoils within me;  
my compassion grows warm and tender.”**  
NRSV

**“I can’t let you go.  
“I can’t give you up.”  
“I’ll find a way to bring them home.”**  
Cont. Eng.

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How might we benefit from this lesson today?

Abraham Joshua Heschel points out,  
with Hosea we are given ear to the inner actions,  
not simply to divine mood swings,  
**“the modulation of divine feelings”**  
(see Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 49),  
but more fundamentally to  
the revelation of a **divine disposition**.

What will finally prevail is  
not harm and destruction,  
but healing and reconciliation;  
judgments rise and they are real;  
but judgment is not an end game;  
mercy trumps judgment;  
human provocations -  
and they are both legion and deadly,  
will not divert the Divine from  
the love that is bound to save.

This affirmation is not an easy tonic;  
this is no simple:  
God will take care of us, regardless.  
it would be a terrible mistake to  
indulge in such a reduction of Hosea.

The breach that exists in creation  
is severe, impacting not only  
human life, **‘the wild animals, the birds, the fish  
of the sea’** (Hosea 4:30) this a summary of life  
on the planet as we know it. So the creation is  
at risk due to spurning of the law and prophets.  
Yet Hosea reveals the God who will not forsake  
God’s love.

And Hosea is confident that we might  
love in accord with the love of the Lord;  
that our inner disposition,  
our outlook, our temper, might  
reflect that of God.

It is this thought that gets echoed through  
the centuries, even to this day.

**“The greatest challenge of the day is:  
how to bring about a revolution of the heart,  
a revolution which has to start with each  
one of us.”**

Dorothy Day

The revolution of the heart is to grasp  
and hold firm to the inner disposition –  
to have a heart like that of God.

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Question that I’m pondering:  
what would it mean for us to  
love the world and all that dwell

therein with a heart like that of God?  
What signs would indicate a revolution  
has taken place deep within our hearts?

Make no mistake:  
our hearts can be broken in this world.  
With losses, and disappointments,  
and rejections, betrayals, and neglect,  
and abuse; and the heart can grow cold.

Some episodes of life are so shattering,  
we shut down all feeling simply to protect ourselves,  
to defend ourselves.  
And so our spheres become quite small.  
And faith, to the degree faith is factor in  
such life, becomes dull and insignificant.

This, though, is not life as God intends.  
God would have us be so much more.

I've tried to closely monitor what time  
I've spent listening to the political conventions  
this past couple of weeks. I was in/out of  
Cleveland just prior the RNC, which was  
closely followed this week with the DNC  
in Philadelphia.

One speaker, the Rev. William Barber, was  
especially adept at catching my attention; he issued  
a challenge that we be "**moral defibrillators**"  
of our time.

"In this season, when some want to harden and  
stop the heart of our democracy, we are being  
called like our foremothers and fathers to be the  
**moral defibrillators of our time.**

We must shock this nation with the power of love.  
We must shock this nation with the power of mercy.  
We must shock this nation and fight



for justice for all.  
We can't give up on the heart of our democracy.  
Not now, not ever."

This is the prophetic work entrusted  
and always expected of the church;  
and we are wise when so engaged,  
and we are Christian  
when we advance the love of Jesus,  
with a heart like Jesus  
that had no limit upon its reach of  
humanity in peril due to its  
lethal infidelities.

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A final word.  
Have you ever tempted to give up on the church?  
I ask this, knowing all we know about the church,  
especially its imperfections and limitations,  
its pride and presumptions.  
I suppose we have all had our moments.  
Yet think with me - the church is the one  
institution in all the world that seeks to organize  
community based upon the Love and Lover  
that refuses to give up or give in.  
When the church holds out that grand vision  
then we praise the Lord!  
And when the church doesn't, we plead mercy,  
and ask forgiveness for having lived as less  
than was first expected, and never desired.

Pope Francis was in the news this week - in Poland.  
Said the church should apologize to gay  
men and women the church has either  
offended or exploited.

And he went on ... saying apologies are due also to the  
poor, to exploited women, to children exploited

for labor, for having blessed “many weapons.”

There are many who feel “**asking forgiveness**” is a sign of weakness, and admission of fallibility.

I do not share such sentiment.

Francis is not being weak;  
    simply honest; acknowledging  
the church with its fallibility  
is quite resourceful in breaking  
    the heart of God.

We’ve been so blessed with gospel,  
    yet our capacity to withhold,  
    to begrudge and arbitrate in ways  
        that limit gospel,  
    is an all too common experience.

I sense the Pope hasn’t said too much;  
    but maybe too little.

    The list of who and how  
the church has failed is open ended.

Forgiveness is not weakness;  
it is in fact our only hope.  
Forgiveness is an essential part,  
foundational and fundamental  
    to the Christian life,  
pathway to the peace and reconciliation  
God holds for each and all of us.

This is the vision Hosea glimpsed  
    in the heart of God’s love.  
The divine, dogged persistence that  
love will not forsake, will not relent, will not recede,  
until love’s work is finished and complete,  
with blessing for the world and all who dwell therein.

May our lives be so charged  
for living in these days.

May we serve as moral defibrillators  
charging the world with Jesus love  
and light.

Amen.

*(Sermons are typically composed in haste,  
for the demands of the day are many;  
so be charitable as you read; and remember:  
the contents of this sermon have not been edited  
and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)*