

A Sermon for DaySpring

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“Severe Mercy”

Hosea 1: 2-10

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It would be my guess that when you pick up your Bible to do a bit of devotional reading, you don't turn over to the Minor Prophets. When it's time to hear an encouraging word, that's not where you look.

For one thing, they're so dang hard to find... No normal person can open a Bible and flip it open to Amos or Habakkuk. Serious Christians make an effort but then after thumbing fruitlessly through the later half of the Old Testament, they check and make sure no one's looking and turn to the Table of Contents.

These are small books and in lots of ways, not a real fun read.

Hosea, for instance, begins with this odd order to a preacher to go marry a prostitute. This is not a good career move. He's just getting started. He's wants to make it as a “man-o-the-cloth” and God tells him to find someone from the red light district for his partner in ministry.

She probably won't be heading up the WMU if you know what I mean.

You probably don't want her teaching the Bible Story at VBS.

No tellin' what she'll bring to potluck.

This is an odd order for a preacher... for anyone.

So right off the bat you have this very “unfair” thing that God does to one of His servants and then... if that's not bad enough, he names their kids for them.

Jezreel... which bascially means, **“You better duck because I'm about to punish you.”**

Lo-Ruhma, **“I'm not showing love to Israel anymore.”**

Lo-Ammi, **“You aren't my people and I ain't your God.”**

Poor kids... Can you imagine how they felt when they were out playing kick ball in the street and Hosea called them for dinner. **“You better duck because I'm about to punish you.... I'm not loving you anymore... You aren't my people... it's time for dinner.”**

I bet the roll call at school was a real drag. **“I'm not loving you'... uhhh... is that what you go by? Ummm... what do your friends call you? How about, ah, Skippy.”**

At recess... it would be **“Red rover, red rover let 'you aren't my people and I'm not your God' come over.”**

That's the way Hosea reads in the beginning... It's classic Old Testament doom and gloom, "look out," wrath of God kind of stuff... and we don't go there... not much. Especially we moderate Christians.

We don't really know what to do with that... because we like grace. And to be sure, the story of Hosea ends with a healthy dose of that. Gomer, you've probably heard, leaves her husband with the three kids, and goes back to her former occupation.

And Hosea's life becomes the great illustration... because rather than leaving Gomer to sleep in the bed she'd made, in the mess she'd made... God sends Hosea to find her and to buy her back. It cost him plenty.

So at the end of it all there is grace... and Gomer's back in Hosea's house as a sign of it. Because that's the way it is with all of God's children. God never removes the welcome mat and what's more, God even goes looking for us and is willing to "buy us back, even though it costs him plenty."

That's the God we know and love, right? And yet... and yet to be true to the scriptures... we have to acknowledge that there is something else. Judgement is there too... right alongside mercy. Judgement is there... and even in Jesus.

Go read the gospels... Jesus can be as tough as he is tender. **"You Pharisees are dead inside... like whitewashed tombs."** Sounds like judgement to me.

In John, chapter five, there's a guy who has been crippled for 38 years and Jesus heals him... He's a bit of a squirrel because he runs to the authorities and tells them that Jesus healed him and did it on the Sabbath which was a no, no. Later Jesus sees him and says, **"Look, you're well now... but stop sinning or something worse is going to happen to you."**

Jesus isn't Mr. Rogers... sometimes he only has words of blessing, **"I don't condemn you,"** and there are other times... times when he seems so raw, like with that Samaritan woman he'd just met. **"You've had five husbands and the man you're living with now isn't your husband."**

So much as we moderates might not like it, Jesus tells it like it is and sometimes that's merciful and sometimes... the truth hurts. **"You've turned my Father's house of prayer into a market for crooked salesmen."**

The point is that Jesus, as sweet as he is, doesn't remove so easily the tension we find in the Bible between judgment and grace. John Killinger once said, **"Jesus was God's way of dealing with a bad reputation..."** and

I like that but the problem comes in how we hear it because Paul says in Colossians, **“That all the fullness of God... all of God, dwells in Jesus.”**

For sure... God is love... but what is that... what does it look like?

Well in Hosea it begins with real honesty. What else does wholeness do in the face of brokenness?

What is justice to do in the face of unfairness?

And goodness in the midst of meanness?

And what else can a God who is love do in light of something that is so unloving? This faithful God is dealing with unfaithfulness... the people were out chasing any idol they thought might make their crops grow.

“What’s a faithful God to do?”

God says what is... what is true. Of course... how else can wholeness happen without being clear. And it’s so tough... which I suppose is what love has to do to wake them up.

It’s like when you were a kid and your parents really needed to get your attention and they used your middle name. You sat up and you looked...

God is prone to calling our middle names. What else is truth to do? And how can ultimate life let us by with sloppy living. You teachers know, don’t you. Love calls you to make demands.

But when God goes off sounding so demanding... it seems at least... that he stops sounding loving and stops sounding like Jesus. Is there a conflict... two pictures of the Divine, headed into some collision.

Are we forced to make a choice... “God number One” or “God number Two” The truth is... when we choose, we lose. Let go of truth and life crumbles... Let go of grace, mercy... and life crumbles. Collapse either of these realities and the other one collapses.

In our reading earlier, the Psalmist made a prediction... **“Mercy and truth... will meet. Righteousness and peace will kiss.”** It’s an intimate reality. There’s a togetherness here, we can’t get with our mind. **“Mercy, unending love... embracing truth.”** And that word (truth), I’m told, can also be translated “severity.” Don’t think of it as a list of rules, but rather “intensity.” Life, ultimate life, bounded... focused so as to be effective.

Mercy and severity... two sides of the same divine coin?

What seem to be opposites...

two things that seem poles apart,

perhaps aren’t at all in God’s being.

It’s just hard for us to see that.

“Severity and mercy”... where C.S. Lewis got his term “Severe Mercy,” I suppose, to describe what happened to him in the death of his wife. Mercy but so severe...

It’s what the Psalmist says in another place (62: 11). **“One thing God has spoken, two things have I heard: that you, O God, are strong, and that you, O Lord, are loving.”**

One voice... one thing spoken... one reality, that we experience in two different ways.

They will kiss, the Psalmist says. We’ll see them in their intimacy. Judgment and grace. Love and truth. God’s yes... God’s no. Martin Luther said, **“God’s holiness and God’s love, kiss on the cross.”**

The synthesis of mercy and judgement happens in Jesus. He contains this... he holds these opposites together. He lives there in the middle and it is the death of him. God says one thing in Jesus... and two things have we heard.

We are... and the world is... in great need.

Sin is real and sin is costly...

When I look at Jesus and what God is saying, that’s part of what I hear. Things matter... who I am, what I do, what I become... what we are is of consequence to God. That’s the hard, severe truth.

But I also look... we look... listen... and such love. A picture of God running after us, in Jesus. There is nothing of God held back in the cross. No punches pulled with regard to God’s judgement of who we are. No invitation withheld with regard to God’s love that forgives and forgives and forgives and forgives.

A heart broken by who we are as a human race... and heart completely willing to take us back and take us in.

We’re coming forward today to this table. You’re invited to a moment with God... to hear God’s one thing, which is two things. There’s a symbol on the top of this table. Have you seen it yet? It’s called the eye of God.

God sees... sees you. Come to this table and be seen as you are... broken, sinful, needful human being.

Come to this table and be seen as you are... beloved, graced, always welcomed... child that you are.