

**Cords of Kindness**

July 31, 2022

**Hosea 11:1-11**

*<sup>1</sup> When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. <sup>2</sup> The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals and offering incense to idols. <sup>3</sup> Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk; I took them up in my arms, but they did not know that I healed them. <sup>4</sup> I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them.*

*<sup>5</sup> They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me. <sup>6</sup> The sword rages in their cities; it consumes their oracle priests and devours because of their schemes. <sup>7</sup> My people are bent on turning away from me. To the Most High they call, but he does not raise them up at all. <sup>8</sup> How can I give you up, 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. <sup>9</sup> I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim, for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath. <sup>10</sup> They shall go after the LORD, who roars like a lion; when he roars, his children shall come trembling from the west. <sup>11</sup> They shall come trembling like birds from Egypt and like doves from the land of Assyria, and I will return them to their homes, says the LORD.*



Today we continue to walk with Hosea. We pick up the story in chapter 11 today. During the intervening nine chapters, Hosea makes efforts at raising and being a family. As many of you know, this is not always an easy task – from any role

in the family. It is not always easy being a husband. It is not always easy being a wife. It is not always easy being a child or young adult. It is not always easy being a sibling. Within the context of family, it is not always easy to love and to be loved. We are all human – prone to sin and to being selfish and irritable and many other things that are often detrimental to our relationships. These things, along with our bad habits and poor decisions, can lead to strains on our relationships. Such was the case with Hosea and Gomer in today's text.

You might recall, she was promiscuous. Depending on the translation you read, Gomer is either a prostitute or a harlot. As you can imagine, either would be hard on a marriage. But this is the woman that God led Hosea to marry, this is the mother of his children, this is the woman he loves. So, in chapter three, Hosea goes and redeems her from another adulterous relationship and he brings her back home. I think there are points in most relationships where one person or the other needs redeemed or restored. These are times when one person must choose to reach out and to love the other in spite of the other's sinful behavior or bad decisions. These are times when love must win out over the selfish inner person in all of us. And these are often times when faith must lead the way as we seek to model God's covenant love for us. This covenant love, this love that God has for you and for me and for all of humanity, that is the focus of this time together. As we begin to lean into loving and holding onto cords of kindness today, let us begin in a simple word of prayer...



Raising children is a task that takes great effort. As a parent, you try and teach and set a good example for your children.

As a parent, you set boundaries and try to reign them back

in when they edge close or perhaps trample those

boundaries. As a parent, you support and encourage and guide your children to become reasonably responsible young adults. Along the way, as Christian parents, you plant seeds of faith and pray that one day your children walk as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

There are stages in parenting – stages that we go through as we learn to parent, stages that our children go through as they grow from infant to toddler to child to teen to young adult. Each stage brings its own challenges, its own difficulties. There are days when we question our decision to ever have children. There are days when we are millimeters away from feeling like throwing in the towel. But each stage also brings times of triumph and days of great joy. There are days when we are so in love with our children that we could almost fly. There are moments when we just watch them and smile. Over and through and in it all, wrapped in cords of kindness, is the love that guides our parenting.



The same can be said of our other relationships. Whether marriage or friendship, the dynamics of parenting apply. There are ebbs and flows, ups and downs, good days and bad days to all of our relationships. There are seasons when life is just great and there are seasons when life is not so great and both affect our relationships.

Such is the season that Hosea finds himself in. By the middle of the book there is a deep crisis in Hosea's life. It is a mess. To be blunt, it is horrific. Hosea and Gomer are living separate – physically, emotionally, spiritually. It could not get much worse. It is at this point in chapter 3, he goes and finds his wife as she is living as a harlot or prostitute and he redeems her, bringing her back home. This broken relationship, this painful time, it mirrors what is happening between God and Israel, the chosen people. God and the people are separated too - physically, emotionally, spiritually. It is a broken, painful time in their relationship.

As a parent, did your child ever rebel? Did a child ever bring strife and unrest to your family? Were you ever pushed to the brink of giving up or giving in with one or more of your children? In Hosea's day, God was pushed to the brink. The stubborn and idolatrous people had God on the brink of giving up on them. Yet, God's faithful love will not allow this to happen. God is committed to them. The covenant love that God promised long ago remains strong. Strained but strong. Tested but steadfast. God's love and grace will triumph one day. Grace and forgiveness will abound. This risky, dangerous, hard love – it will persevere, and it will prevail.

Delve into the middle section of the book of Hosea with me. How easy do you think it was for Hosea to go and find his wandering wife, to redeem her and bring her back home once again? How easy would it be to keep saying 'I love you' (and meaning it) to a woman who seemed bent on being with other men? How easy do you think it would be to restore this woman back into a full and loving relationship with you?

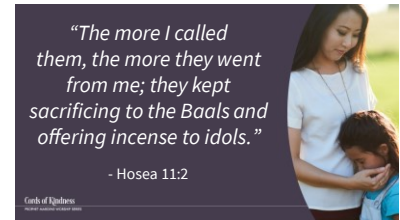
This experience, this very hard road, it was God's way of equipping and preparing Hosea to go and speak God's truth to a wayward and wandering people. Hosea is ready to hear what God is saying about and to feel what God is feeling concerning God's relationship with the chosen people. Hosea is ready to convey God's truth to these stubborn and rebellious people with power and conviction. He is ready to speak from the heart.

As I reflect on the way God equipped and prepared Hosea, it made me wonder: when in my life have I been through something like Hosea went through? It brought to mind times and experiences that I would have never chosen to walk through on my own. They were moments and events that brought hurt and pain, times that challenged my relationships with others and even with God, experiences that challenged my faith. Have you had such moments, such experiences? And as I reflected upon them, as many of you would do with yours, I came to realize that God was forcing me through that trial or difficulty or hardship with a purpose in mind. Almost always it was a purpose that I could only see later, when looking back or through the lens of God's eyes. These defining and shaping times were necessary for my journey of faith.

Turning to our passage from Hosea 11, we can see into the heart of God. This is one of the most honest and open passages that we have that sheds light on God's relationship with humanity in general and with God's children in particular. In verse 1 we read, *"When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son."* God looks longingly back on the days when Israel was redeemed, when God rescued them from Egypt.



That redemption, that rescuing, it came from a deep place of love. But remembering that love turns bittersweet in the next verse, where God pines, *“The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals and offering incense to idols.”* In spite of God’s best efforts, the people wandered, they chased after false gods. The more God called, the further they wandered. If you’ve experienced this as a parent, you know the hurt that God felt in the depths of the divine heart as the children wandered away.



Continuing into the next verses, God recalls the upbringing of the children – how God taught them to walk, how God took them up in God’s arms and healed them, how God led them with *“cords of human kindness”* and with *“bands of love,”* how God bent down and fed them. In these verses, 3 and 4, we can hear God’s care and compassion. We can feel God’s provision and protection being poured into the people of Israel. It is God’s way of saying, “After all that I did for you...” There is a melancholy to these words of God. These are emotions and words that most every parent feels and expresses at some point in parenthood. We can relate to God because we’ve all thought or said those words – “After all that I did for you...” – when we’ve been hurt by someone we love.



As we move into verses 5-8, we see God playing another parental role that we are likely familiar with too. God first laments the days that are coming, days when Assyria will become the new Egypt, ruling over God’s people. As God looks down from on high, violence and anger rages in the cities.

These are the affects of God's people turning from God. And then God connects the dots for us. Remembering the days of raising up these children, God wonders aloud how they can be given up. God almost wails, *"How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?"* Can you sense the very heart of God tearing as God comes to terms with what will happen, with what must happen? Again, we too have been here. We've tried and tried and tried to help our children make a good decision. We're almost willing to do anything to stop what we can foresee from happening. But we cannot. What will happen must happen. And our hearts too ache for our child.

Turning to the second half of verse 8 we again see a loving and committed God. Here we read, *"My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender."* God next



pledges not to destroy the disobedient children. Yes, Israel will fall, and exile will come, but the people will ultimately be restored. God will not come now in final wrath. One day the Lord will roar, and *"when he roars, his children shall come trembling from the west."* One day the Lord will come in victory, roaring like a lion. On that day all of God's people will come in awe and trembling, bowing at the throne of our God. One day every knee will bow. One day. One day cords of kindness will wrap around the hearts of all who love and worship the Lord.



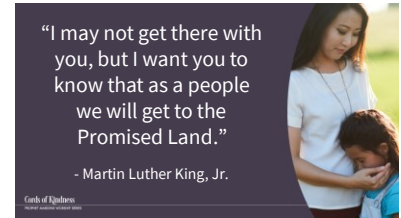
The reality in the book of Hosea, though, is that the children of God continue to be rebellious. Israel continues to worship false gods, continues to use dishonest scales, and continues to ignore the needy and the poor. Hosea's words do not bring the people back into alignment with God's ways, just as Amos' did not.

Israel continues to reject and resist God. Yet out of God's great love for the children, God has a vision and a promise. God will restore them. God will continue to be there, to be present in whatever ways possible, enduring the heartbreaking experience of watching the ones so dearly loved dig themselves a deeper and deeper hole.

My friends, this time in Hosea was not the first time that humankind had done this to God. And it will be far from the last. It was not the first time that the people of God had ignored and rejected one of God's prophets. And it was far from the last. Hosea was not the first prophet to weep, beg, and plead with a stubborn and rebellious people. And he was far from the last.

A more recent example came before me in a commentary that I read on this passage.

Let me begin with the quote that the author began with: "I may not get there with you, but I want you to know that as a people we will get to the Promised Land." These words were spoken by Martin Luther King, Jr., the night before he



was killed. King had given his life to a nation, many of whom had often resisted and hated and rejected him. In the midst of the battle, there were these moments of despair. The voice of despair is often known too well by the prophet who hopes from the margins.

As we prepare to draw to a close, let us connect today's passage and its lasting themes to our lives and to our faith. The cycle of repentance, redemption, and restoration evident in Hosea's prophecy, and even his marriage, remains intimately connected to our lives.



This sequence of repentance, redemption, and restoration plays itself out in the lives of real people, of people we know and in our lives too. Hosea reminds us that the scriptures are far from a mere collection of abstract statements with no relation to real life. No, they work their way into our day-to-day existence, commenting on issues that impact all of our actions and most of our relationships.

The book of Hosea assures us of God's unconditional love for the people of God. But it is also a picture of how God can be dishonored and angered by the actions of the beloved children. Maybe we wonder, how can a child who is given an abundance of love, mercy, and grace treat the creator with so much disrespect? Yet, the truth is that we have done just this for centuries as a people and we do it as individuals as well. At times you and I treat the God who pours out an abundance of love, mercy, and grace with disrespect. As we consider how the Israelites turned their backs on God, we need to look no further than the mirror in front of us to see a reflection of those same Israelites. This is a truth that we must reckon with ourselves.

And even so, my brothers and sisters in Christ, we also hold dear to a still deeper truth. God's cords of kindness continue to reach out to us and yearn to hold us tenderly in that unconditional love, mercy, and grace. Those cords of kindness are no-matter-what cords – no matter how hard we pull against them, no matter how we might try and sever them, no matter how rebellious and disobedient we become – God's cords of kindness and love are always there, always ready to enfold us. Thanks be to God. Amen and amen.

**GPS – Grow, Pray, Study**

- 1) *Grow*. What past events or experiences have made God look at you as God looked at the people of Hosea's time? How has God's cords of kindness and unconditional love led to growth in your relationship with God?
- 2) *Pray*. How it is with your soul these days? Where are you struggling with rebelliousness or disobedience towards God? How might you turn these things over to God this week?
- 3) *Study*. Read Hosea 14:4-9. After an episode or season in sin, when has God restored you like God promises to restore Israel in these verses?