

## **Grace Makes Beauty out of Ugly Things**

Hosea 1:2-10

July 29, 2007

Have you ever forgotten who you are? When our boys were in their mid-teens, we lived in Elkhart. Just a couple of blocks behind our house were a couple of acres of wooded land where they liked to play. Nothing at all wrong with that...kids like to do stuff in the woods.

On the other side of the woods was a lumber company. One day the police came knocking at our door telling me that they had a complaint that some neighborhood kids had stolen some lumber and built a tree house with it. We finally got to the bottom of the story, and as it turned out, there were twelve or thirteen boys who began to build this tree house with scraps of lumber that they found lying around. One thing led to another and pretty soon they were taking more than just scrap lumber.

A few days later, we met at the police station with all the kids and their parents as well as a representative of the lumber company. The company's position was that these boys had done something stupid. They weren't insisting on pursuing it on a criminal level, but simply wanted to be reimbursed for the lumber taken. They were content to let each family handle the discipline issues within their own home.

As it turned out, each boy was responsible for about \$90 or so. I remember that our boys were grounded for a long time, except for the times they were allowed to work at odd jobs to pay off their debt. I actually told them that they were going to be grounded until they got married, but later on I relented a little bit. Things were not much different in the other boy's homes.

As we sat in the police station with the other parents – some of whom we knew and some we didn't – it struck me that these were good families whose kids had done something incredibly stupid. The boys weren't criminals. They didn't come from bad home situations. They weren't headed for a life of crime. What they had done however was to act in a way that was completely unacceptable. They acted in ways that were directly opposed to the values by which they had been raised. They had disappointed and embarrassed the heck out of their parents. We all insisted that they pay the price...and they did.

In the last ten years, our sons have matured and have both become responsible adults. There was just a period of time in their lives when they forgot who they were and how they had been raised.

There were times in the corporate life of Israel when they forgot who they were and how they had been raised. There were times when they walked away from God, disregarded God's instructions, and thumbed their noses at God's authority. When those times became especially

evil, God would raise up prophets to call the people back to faithfulness. Such is the situation in the Scripture lesson for today.

The prophet Hosea was unmarried at this point and God told him to go out and marry a prostitute. It is possible that God is telling him to marry an actual prostitute, but I think it is more likely that the word is used here as a metaphor to describe the religious apostasy or their intentional rejection of their religious foundation. Later on in his prophecy, Hosea will say that a spirit of whoredom has led the people astray (4:12).

The image of marriage is at the center of Hosea's prophecy. The relationship between God and the people is one not unlike the marriage relationship between a man and a woman. Israel has chosen to walk away from her end of the relationship and so has brought judgment on herself. Israel has betrayed God.

Hosea chose a woman named Gomer, which means "to end or come to an end." That is a fitting name because it describes the relationship between the people and God.

Their first child is to be named "Jezeel" which refers to the valley about 50 miles north of Jerusalem which was the site of a bloody coup by Jehu, a general in the army of King Jehoram. The coup originally enjoyed wide prophetic support, but Jehu slaughtered many more people than needed or expected. Even the King of Judah, who was visiting the King of Israel at the time, was killed. For this gratuitous and terrible violence, God will bring retribution on the whole nation. You can find the story of the Jezeel massacre in I Kings 9-10.

Gomer's second child was named "No Mercy" or "Not-Pitied" as a sign that God would no longer have pity on Israel, but would instead bless Judah. Historically, this came to pass because the northern Kingdom of Israel was soon destroyed by invading Assyrians, while the southern Kingdom of Judah lasted another one hundred years.

The third child born of Hosea and Gomer was named "Nobody" or "Not My People" as a symbol of the broken relationship between the people and God.

This however, is not the final word on the subject. The last verse of the lesson for today says, "In the very place where they were once named "Nobody," they will be named "God's Somebody." The NRSV says it like this: "In the place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' they will be called 'sons of the living God.'" In other words, the turbulent relationship between the people and God will be healed and judgment will be replaced by salvation.

As I read this section of prophecy, I notice five insights regarding the relationship between us and God. You see, this isn't just a prophecy for the eighth century B.C. It speaks to us at the beginning of the third millennium A.D.

First of all, God told Hosea to marry a prostitute. Just think about the scandal if one of the preachers in Fort Wayne were to do that. Still, think of it this way. Though God's people don't remain faithful; God does! God as divine spouse endures all sorts of violations of trust, yet remains faithful and trusting. We don't deserve that, but it is our gift nonetheless.

In addition, remember that Hosea is an example of trusting obedience. Hosea didn't argue with or complain to God, consult with his friends, or find himself a more appropriate wife. He simply did as he was told. He didn't ask questions, but just showed up to obey his orders.

During each Annual Conference session, as the clergy appointments are set for the next year, we all pray the Wesley Covenant Prayer together. In part, it reads like this.

Lord, make me what you will. I put myself fully into your hands: put me to doing, put me to suffering, let me be employed for you, or said aside for you, let me be full, let me be empty, let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and with a willing heart give it all to your pleasure and disposal.

How well do we do with God's call for obedience? Hosea is a good example of what it means to trust God fully and without reservation.

Secondly, let's not be afraid to see ourselves in Gomer. I know it is hard for good folks like us to identify with a prostitute, but as a symbol of Israel's turning away God, we have to be honest with ourselves. We are not always faithful. We are not always truthful. We are not always obedient. We sometimes fall far short of what God has in mind for us. We are sometimes guilty of allowing other things in life to take first priority over worship of God. We cannot recognize the faithfulness of God without also seeing our own unfaithfulness to him.

Three: Their first child was Jezreel. Jezreel was the valley in which a horrible sin against God was committed. Sins continue to have consequences, even far removed from the original act. Of course I believe that God forgives our sin, but that doesn't mean that we still won't have to deal with the consequences for our mistakes.

Four: The second child was "Not Pitied" or "No Mercy." Mercy was shown to Judah for a time, while Israel was left to suffer the consequences of her sins. I will confess to you that I don't always understand the justice, judgment, and mercy of God. Sometimes God withholds judgment, as in the case of Judah, and sometimes God decides that the time for judgment is at

hand. However, the fact of the matter is that we more often experience the mercy of God when we instead deserve judgment. That is a reason for thanksgiving.

And finally, fifth: The third child of Hosea and Gomer was named “Not My People” or “Nobody.” Sometimes, we choose to give up on God. As difficult as it must be for God, there are times I believe, when he honors our request to ignore him. I’m sure that there are tears in his eyes when he grants our wishes.

But the story doesn’t end here. This prophecy follows. “In the very place where they were once named Nobody, they will be named God’s Somebody.” As Peter says in his first New Testament letter, “Once you were no people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (I Peter 2:10).

We sometimes forget who we are and how we have been raised. We sometimes disregard or ignore God. We sometimes choose to walk away and go after our own desires. Yet, grace is always on the horizon, always available. God held the prospect for grace up for the people of Israel, and continues to offer it up to us.

It is not only teenagers who sometimes forget who they are. But God has the power to bring us back into the family, forgiven and healed. God has the capacity and the desire to change our ugliness into beauty. God wants us back. Are we ready to walk back into his arms, seeking forgiveness and restoration? If we are ready, so is God.