

Mothering God

I'm relatively sure I was in seminary when I was brought up short by the concept that the Biblical usage of male nouns and pronouns for God was problematic. That was in the early 80s, remember, and for a good Southern Baptist, King-James-reading, young man like me, it was not surprising to be so slow to enlightenment on that point. I'd just never thought about it; never heard it presented. But many of the faculty at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary were quite adamant about it. Male pronouns for God were to be used sparingly and in conjunction with female pronouns or not at all. I think it was the late Rev. Dr. Frank Tupper, the theology prof from whom I took the most classes, including "Formation for Ministry" in my first semester, who really convinced me of the pernicious nature of this patriarchal habit. I do know that Frank wouldn't accept papers with male pronouns for the Almighty.

While the genderless language about God and the all-inclusive nature of God are concepts to which I've been devoted since those early Seminary days, I confess that I still struggle to apply the language sometimes. I refer to God in public prayer as "Loving Creator" or simply "God," but in private, I find myself still lifting prayers up to the LORD. My dad, who was often called on to lead in prayer publicly in the churches we attended, always offered his prayers to "LORD God," an affectation I used to mock to the delight of my teenaged peers at Kirkwood Baptist. I still stumble over the new words to hymns I've known and loved for decades when they've been de-gendered – and I still miss "thees" and "thous" in old hymns, too. But I try very hard to balance any use of "Father God" with "Mother God," in prayers and sermons. It's important for us to remember that all of us, male, female, or differently gendered, are made in the image of God and that our gender expressions find equal space in that image and in the heart and will of God.

But there aren't a whole lot of Bible passages we can point to as showing the feminine side of our One God, although the concept of Lady Wisdom helps somewhat in that regard. So, when I come across a passage like today's reading from Hosea that seems so specifically to be a portrait of our Loving Creator as Mother, I sit up and take notice. I want to explore with you all this morning both the language and situation of the passage and how it still connects with us today, and why Hosea, who is so connected with dysfunctional families and a negative attitude toward women, ultimately gives us a beautiful picture of a loving family as a metaphor for the Beloved Community.

Since I've only preached once in sixteen years from the Book of Hosea, a re-introduction is probably in order. After the days of the unified kingdom under Saul, David, and Solomon, the twelve tribes of Israel split into two separate nations: Israel in the north and Judah in the south. The Kingdom of Israel was also sometimes called Samaria, after its capitol city, or Ephraim, named for the largest of its tribes, the descendants of Joseph's son. Hosea was called by God to be God's prophet to this Northern Kingdom in the days close to the end of its existence, roughly contemporary with the work of Isaiah in the Southern Kingdom. In the most well-known and most debated passage of Hosea, in chapter one, "the LORD said to Hosea, 'Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord.'" The book goes on to tell the story of this troubled family which, whether in actuality or only metaphorically, mirrors the story of Israel's lack of faithfulness to the God who redeemed them from Egypt and rescued them from so many other dangers. Just as Hosea's wife was unfaithful to their marriage, so Israel was unfaithful to God, continually forsaking God

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to worship the fertility and war gods of their neighbors, forgetting the call of God to be distinct, just, and righteous.

The Book of Hosea is a blend of God's warnings and God's promises to God's people, both Israel and Judah, although the focus is on Israel. In addition to their idolatries, God warns the people through Hosea about their violence and their corruption. In chapter six, we read: "Gilead is a city of evildoers, tracked with blood. As robbers lie in wait for someone, so the priests are banded together; they murder on the road to Shechem, they commit a monstrous crime... the corruption of Ephraim is revealed, and the wicked deeds of Samaria; for they deal falsely, the thief breaks in, and the bandits raid outside... By their wickedness they make the king glad, and the officials by their treachery." It is a picture of a society riddled with crime; one in which even the highest offices are held by those who profit from shady doings.

According to Hosea, Israel has also failed in God's calling to be an example to the nations. Instead, they flit from alliance to alliance, with kings looking to strike the best deals for themselves rather than focusing on good government and moral leadership. Chapter 5 says, "When Ephraim saw his sickness, and Judah his wound, then Ephraim went to Assyria, and sent to the great king. But he is not able to cure you or heal your wound... Ephraim has become like a dove, silly and without sense; they call upon Egypt, they go to Assyria." Indeed, during Hosea's lifetime, the Northern Kingdom allied with first one of their traditional enemies and then the other, trying in vain to secure the peace that only God could bring. Ultimately, despite the pleas of God through God's prophets, Israel was destroyed, caught between Assyria and Egypt.

In the midst of these passages of judgement and warning comes the touching statement of God's love for Israel in chapter 11. I was somewhat surprised, when I started reading commentaries on the passage this week, that all of the authors I read couched their remarks in language about God as loving Father. When I first read the passage several weeks ago, as I was choosing the direction for this final month of sermons, I was struck by the *maternal* language of the passage. Of course, in speaking of God's love for God's creation, we do well to balance maternal and paternal language, as I mentioned before. But to me, certain of the images in this chapter can *only* refer to God as Mother. Remember, even though there were cities in the Northern Kingdom at the time of Hosea, such as Samaria, the overall culture was still agrarian. The raising of children was by necessity women's work as the men would have been in the fields from sunup to sundown, whether tending crops or flocks. So, when God says, in verse 3, "Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms..." or, in verse 4, "I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them" then the overriding image for me is that of a mother with her little one. Are fathers capable of such tenderness? Of course, they are, but if one is seeking passages that show God as the model for maternal behavior as well as paternal, here is a beautiful example.

So, I feel fully justified in saying that in Hosea 11, I find a compelling portrait of a mother with a wayward child. Several commentators point out that in chapter 11 as well as elsewhere in the book, Hosea links the sins of Israel to the Ten Commandments. In verse 2, we find the people of the Northern Kingdom breaking the commands against having other gods and against the making of idols: "they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols." These sins against God are compounded by the crimes against humanity, the breaking of the latter commandments

in the list of ten, that are shown elsewhere in the book, as I cited earlier – the killing, the stealing, the lying, the adultery, and so on. Like a teenager rejecting the rules of loving parents, the people of Israel, in rejecting the commandments of God, are choosing the path of destruction.

And, as Hosea warns, destruction will indeed be the result of this national adolescent rebellion. “They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me. The sword rages in their cities, it consumes their oracle-priests, and devours because of their schemes.” Historically, of course, Assyria did indeed conquer Israel with terrible bloodshed and dispersed its inhabitants among their other territories, bringing in the defeated from those territories to partially repopulate the land of Ephraim, as was its imperial policy. But there is also a deeper meaning to Hosea’s warning. By turning their back on their Loving Mother/Father God, they have condemned themselves to lives of oppression, just as they experienced in Egypt before Yahweh rescued them. They will toil for the benefit of others in lands that are not their own. Once again, they are trapped in a domination system that has no thought for them, certainly not the nurturing forgiving love that has caused God to save them from destruction again and again. I will have more to say about the self-imposed penalty of slavery to Pharaoh and his ilk next week, but for now consider – for whom do we toil? What system is it that dominates our lives? As with Israel, God has redeemed us in love for life. In what ways do we still turn to the powers of death instead?

But just as a mother with a wayward child, God will not, cannot, give up on Israel. The consequences of destructive behavior will come. God will not shield Ephraim from the results of their corruption. But divine love will have the last word. “How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? ...My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. 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.”

In the early days of the Church, and to a lesser extent in early Rabbinic Judaism, the influence of the Greek school of philosophy known as Neo-Platonism brought the concept of the immutable, unchanging, and dispassionate God to the Abrahamic religions. We could debate the positives and negatives of this, but a careful reading of the Old Testament reveals a God who is not incapable of change and who experiences both grief and elation over God’s creation, humankind in particular. One of the foremost advocates for this understanding of God was the great Polish-American rabbi, philosopher, and theologian, Abraham Joshua Heschel. In his two-volume work on The Prophets, Heschel discusses this passage in relation to what he calls “the pathos of God.” For Heschel, it is this pathos of God which is responsible for the tension between judgement and mercy in this and several other passages. “These words [. . .] were neither a final judgment nor an actual prediction. Their true intention was to impart the intensity of divine anger. And yet, that anger did not express all that God felt about the people. Intense is his anger, but profound is his compassion.” In his commentary on Hosea for The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary, fellow Baptist and Baylor University Professor of Old Testament James Nogalski calls this passage, “what is perhaps the most humanlike portrayal of divine emotional suffering in all of Scripture.” It is in this suffering, this pathos of God that we find the most compelling portrait of the Loving Mother/Father God in relationship to God’s wandering children, to us.

Nogalski also notes, “For many, the idea of God vacillating runs counter to their preconceived

notions of God's sovereignty. The biblical God, however, is not a mechanistic deity whose actions and decisions are set forever in stone. Rather, the biblical God tempers wrath with patience and compassion. In Hosea 11, the soliloquy characterizes God as agonizing over whether to give up on a wayward child... while God's character defaults to compassion and refuses to give in to human urges of retaliation, God abhors the behavior of this child. In the end, the vacillation of YHWH shows God's compassion at war with God's holiness." For those who might still be using the discredited shorthand of the Old Testament God of judgement versus the New Testament God of mercy, this passage should be allowed to bury that cliché forever.

One of the scholars whose work I consulted this week on Hosea was the late Rev. Dr. Roy Lee Honeycutt. Dr. Honeycutt was the president of Southern Seminary when I was a student there. It was his stirring address against the fundamentalists attempting to take over the Southern Baptist Convention, "To Your Tents, O Israel!" that was my first formal event at Southern, the Convocation of Fall, 1984. Later, I got to know Roy as a fellow member of Crescent Hill Baptist Church. I never had a formal class with him but will forever remember him as a genial and wise elder statesman, with a twinkle in his eye and a rumbling bass voice and an accent from his native Mississippi as slow and sweet as sorghum. I heard the sorghum and remembered the twinkle as I read the chapter on this passage in his Hosea and His Message. Born in 1928, Dr. Honeycutt made no provision for gender equity in that slender book published in 1975 for Southern Baptist laypeople, so I'll ask you to overlook in your mercy the patriarchal language in this excerpt, which otherwise shines with God's love for God's people. By the way, lest you dismiss Dr. Honeycutt as a hopelessly patriarchal old fogey, I'd point out that it was under his presidency that Southern welcomed their first two women professors in biblical studies and theology, our own Dr. Pamela Scalise in Old Testament and Dr. Molly Marshall in theology. Hear now the words of Dr. Honeycutt: "Love was the theme of the Lord's relationship with Israel. There was no other explanation for her existence than his grace, his unmerited love in action: not Israel's genius for religion, for others were religious also; not her strength, for others were stronger; not her potential, for others also possessed amazing potential. The biblical writer made this clear in explaining Israel's unique relationship to the Lord: "It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love upon you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples; but it is because the Lord loves you... that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you." It was this quality of unmerited love that called Israel into existence at the time of the Exodus. The personal, warm relationship between the Lord and Israel is graphic in the NEB translation "When Israel was a boy, I loved him; I called my son out of Egypt." The people of God in every generation form the family of God because of his love and grace. We are sons and daughters, brothers and sisters together in faith, because he first loved us and called us unto himself. How does the Lord love his people? – when he calls them into a family of love."

James Nogalski concludes his coverage of this passage with some questions that I find apt for us this morning: "When we compare ourselves to the loving parent who has reared us, how do our lives stack up? Are we rebellious children, or are we willing to obey? Are we oblivious to what God has done for us and how our actions grieve God? Are we willing to deny our sense of anger and justice so we can seek to show compassion instead?" After 16 and a half years serving this congregation, I think I can say that you all are not oblivious to the grace of God, and I see in

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your lives the willingness to obey (although none of us is perfect in this). The question that most sticks in my craw, and maybe in yours as well, is the last one. Can we, as disciples of Jesus and children of our Loving Creator, remember to put love ahead of justice? Are our lives marked by the mercy that God calls us to love? When I have failed you, it has most often been because I put judgement ahead of mercy. Can I and we continue to remember that lesson as we are faced with a world full of those who use personal freedom as an excuse to put others in danger or to profit at their expense?

I want to close with another passage from Roy Honeycutt, to honor his memory and because I think he puts it so beautifully. Regardless of how well or how poorly we pattern our lives after the will of God and the example of Jesus, God's everlasting promise to us, as revealed to Hosea, is love. "In summary, Hosea answers this fundamental question: "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways": I love you when I call you into my family and you keep on seeking other gods. I love you when I care for you, and you never stop to recognize who it is who takes you by the hand, or heals, or has compassion, or lifts the load when the way becomes weary. I love you when your rebellion prompts me to give you up to your own ways. I love you when I am distressed in the deep of my heart with a compassion that grows warm and tender, distressed at the prospect of giving you up, my (child). I love you with a patience and a determination that uses all the disciplinary forces of history to bring you back to me, for, whatever the cost, I will not give up on you until my love triumphs." For the love of God, which never fails and will finally triumph, thanks be to God. Amen.