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Hosea 2:15, NRSV.

¹⁵ *From there I will give her her vineyards,
and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope.
There she shall respond as in the days of her youth,
as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt.*

Gomer: An Allegory.

I have spoken with a few people over the last several years who, at the end of their lives, or when confronting a disabling disease, worry that they have not done enough to honor their faith in their lives. Virtually always, these are good people, strong believers, who question themselves simply because it is so important to them to love God with all their heart, soul, and mind, and to love their neighbor – and they are worried that their opportunities to serve God are coming to an end. People with these concerns are, as near as I can tell, doing just great in the eyes of God. But one man stood out because he had indeed done some questionable things in his life. His background doesn't matter. We'll just say he had done things that I certainly could never imagine doing myself. And he had done them repeatedly over a period of decades. He wasn't looking for forgiveness, at least not directly. His main concern was whether God would ever

give him another chance to do, as he put it, “good things” with his life, or if God would simply cast him aside and ignore him. Maybe he had done so much harm that it was impossible for him to come back into the good graces of God.

The Bible, especially the Old Testament, has many odd stories in it. I am sure I could give a years’ worth of sermons based simply on bizarre tales from the Hebrew Scriptures. One of the most intriguing is the story of the Prophet Hosea and his wife Gomer. Here are the second and third verses of the first chapter of Hosea. They contain a word that has been translated crudely and improperly:

² When the LORD first spoke through Hosea, 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.” ³ So he went and took Gomer daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son.

This is a very common translation. But here are the same verses from the New King James Version. The previous was from the NRSV:

*² When the LORD began to speak by Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea:
“Go, take yourself a wife of harlotry
And children of harlotry,
For the land has committed great harlotry
By departing from the LORD.”
³ So he went and took Gomer the daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son.*

This is a better translation. The word that is translated from the Hebrew “*zə-nū-nîm*” to “harlotry” refers to adultery or promiscuity. God is ordering Hosea to

marry a woman who will not be faithful to him. Why God orders this becomes very clear when we look at its situation in the larger text of Hosea.

Hosea is one of the minor Prophets, because his book is short. Often the minor Prophets are called “The Twelve”. In the Hebrew Scriptures it was at one point formed into a single scroll and became known as “The Book of The Twelve”. Our oldest known collection of the “The Twelve” as a single volume is from about 200 B.C. Hosea is the first Prophet in this volume, but only because it is the longest of the Minor Prophets, not because he wrote first. We know very little about him, but since he was of marriageable age when he was appointed a Prophet by God, he was young for a Prophet. He served for a quarter century, during very difficult times for Israel. At the time Hosea served, Israel was divided into two kingdoms, Israel in the north, and Judea in the south. Hosea lived in the north. In 722 B.C., the Northern Kingdom was overrun by the Assyrians. Judea or Judah survived another 136 years until the Babylonians conquered it. Israel was never unified again. Although he lived and prophesized in the north, Hosea laid down strong warnings for Judea, which contained Jerusalem. The Book of Hosea contains 14 chapters, and a common allegory runs through it.

The first verse of the book tells us what kings he served under. Note that he served multiple kings in the north and the south:

1 The word of the LORD that came to Hosea son of Beeri, in the days of Kings Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah of Judah, and in the days of King Jeroboam son of Joash of Israel.

After Hosea and his wife Gomer have a son, God tells him to name the boy

Jezreel. God phrases this command in a seemingly odd way:

⁴ And the LORD said to him, "Name him Jezreel; for in a little while I will punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel, and I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel. ⁵ On that day I will break the bow of Israel in the valley of Jezreel."

The name Jezreel is related to a town in Israel that was a sort of winter capital, and that city was intimately associated with the downfall of a corrupt king named Ahab. The name Jezreel means "God sows" and refers to the agricultural fertility of that area. But by cleverly naming the son of Hosea Jezreel, God is artfully turning this phrase around to mean that God also sows punishment, and not just fertility. Hosea has doubts, by the way, about the paternity of his kids.

Gomer then has a daughter, and here is God's corresponding order:

⁶ She conceived again and bore a daughter. Then the LORD said to him, "Name her Lo-ruhamah, for I will no longer have pity on the house of Israel or forgive them. ⁷ But I will have pity on the house of Judah, and I will save them by the LORD their God; I will not save them by bow, or by sword, or by war, or by horses, or by horsemen."

God orders the daughter to be named Lo-ruhamah. It means "not to be pitied".

Odd name for a child. It might be that a better translation from the Hebrew is

"not to be given mercy". God uses the name of Hosea's daughter to warn Israel

that he is fed up with their corruption and evil ways. He is not going to save them the next time they are attacked by a powerful enemy.

After this, we are told this of Gomer, Hosea's wife:

⁸ When she had weaned Lo-ruhamah, she conceived and bore a son. ⁹ Then the LORD said, "Name him Lo-ammi, for you are not my people and I am not your God."

The name Lo-ammi means "not my people". God uses the third child of Hosea to warn the people of Israel that he is going to disinherit them.

The next chapter, 2, is a long poetic piece that describes the people of Israel as being guilty of infidelity and in need of punishment and then restoration. It uses an obvious and rather graphic metaphor of an unfaithful spouse as representing the Israelites in their relationship with God. Here is a fragment, verse 7, where Israel realizes that worshipping pagan gods and living in corrupt ways does not bring security and joy:

*⁷ She shall pursue her lovers,
but not overtake them;
and she shall seek them,
but shall not find them.
Then she shall say, "I will go
and return to my first husband,
for it was better with me then now."*

God makes it clear that there will be punishment, but that God never abandons his people. They are always free, no matter what has happened, to come back to him. Here are verses 14 and 15 of Chapter 2:

- ¹⁴ *Therefore, I will now allure her,
and bring her into the wilderness,
and speak tenderly to her.*
- ¹⁵ *From there I will give her her vineyards,
and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope.
There she shall respond as in the days of her youth,
as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt.*

Through the words of the Prophet, which are of course, the words of God,
we see the very blunt use of the metaphors of the names of Hoseas three kids.

This is the end of Chapter 2, again, as poetry:

- ²¹ *On that day I will answer, says the LORD,
I will answer the heavens
and they shall answer the earth;*
- ²² *and the earth shall answer the grain, the wine, and the oil,
and they shall answer Jezreel;*
- ²³ *and I will sow him for myself in the land.
And I will have pity on Lo-ruhamah,
and I will say to Lo-ammi, "You are my people";
and he shall say, "You are my God."*

The name Gomer, the name of Hosea's wife, is derived from a Hebrew word that means "to bring to an end" and perhaps could be translated as "fulfillment". Scholars generally interpret this to mean that she represents the maximal punishment that the Northern Kingdom will receive, and that Judah will eventually receive for their repeated transgressions. But it also represents the end of the cycle, where God always offers redemption and forgiveness. We see that the story of Gomer, of Hosea's wife, is an allegory for God's relationship with

humanity, with us. In the time of Hosea, in ancient Israel, people married young and marriages were supposed to be monogamous. Right off, early in Genesis God declares this to his people:

²⁴ Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.

Here are the words of Moses, in Deuteronomy, as he speaks for God:

²² If a man is caught lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman as well as the woman. So you shall purge the evil from Israel.

We can understand the power of the allegory of Gomer to the readers of the Hebrew Scriptures. What's interesting is that grasping this allegory and the depth of it relies on four Hebrew names that we would not understand by reading an English Bible. It also relies on understanding the significance of adultery to the Israelite people. That translation in the NRSV that gives us:

Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom,

is in some sense a proper if not literal translation, because adultery was considered no different than prostitution, whether you were a man or a woman.

Remember that Chapter 1 of Hosea tells us about Hosea's marriage, his three children, and their names. Then Chapter 2, which is much longer and very poetic, tells us in blunt terms that Israel has often acted with adultery toward

God. It tells us that God punishes, forgives, and restores. The Northern Kingdom was never reformed after the Assyrian invasion, and its people were almost entirely distributed among and absorbed by the Assyrian people. Judah would be destroyed, too, by the Babylonians, but its people, because they were exiled intact, kept their identity – and the nation of Israel survived spiritually in the land in which they had lived for so long. The next chapter of Hosea, 3, returns to the story of Hosea's domestic situation. It is very short:

3 *The LORD said to me again, "Go, love a woman who has a lover and is an adulteress, just as the LORD loves the people of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love raisin cakes." ² So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and a homer of barley and a measure of wine. ³ And I said to her, "You must remain as mine for many days; you shall not play the whore, you shall not have intercourse with a man, nor I with you." ⁴ For the Israelites shall remain many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or pillar, without ephod or teraphim. ⁵ Afterward the Israelites shall return and seek the LORD their God, and David their king; they shall come in awe to the LORD and to his goodness in the latter days.*

The Book of Hosea thus hammers down the nature of the allegory. First, we read about the family of Hosea, then we read the story of Israel's sins and redemption, then just to make sure we don't miss the point of the allegory, we come back to Hosea and his family. Hosea literally goes to the man Gomer has run off with and purchases her back for silver, bread, and wine. We get the picture: God will literally humiliate himself by taking us back after we have made a fool of him.

There is something else here that is subtle. Notice that the Prophets constantly talk about the redemption of the Chosen People and the restoration of Israel. However, the Unified Kingdom governed by King David, only existed for 100 to 120 years. Compare this to the 3,000 to 4,000 year-long story of the Old Testament, before the birth of Christ. This means that Israel only truly existed for about 2 to 3 percent of the ancient period of the Chosen People. Clearly, we should interpret the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures, not at all in a literal sense, about God giving his people a land of their own to live on, but rather as a spiritual story about God's relationship with humanity. The Israelites and then the Jews continued to live on that land, on and off, but the Bible is not a story about earthly nation building. We have been gifted a story that is truly eternal and global. This is why the Old Testament is so valuable to us.

Let's get back to the man who had been in prison and had done some very disturbing things in his life but still wanted a relationship with God. We haven't named him yet. There are actually two Gomers in the Bible, and the other one is a man. He is Gomer, a grandson of Noah. He is named in Genesis 10:2. Thus, we can refer to this man I spoke to as Gomer. He had had a childhood that was very unstable, to put it mildly, and he seemed to me to have some sort of psychiatric issue. And so, I felt empathy for him. I told Gomer the story of Hosea and Gomer,

and we looked at a couple of passages from the Bible. He took some heart from it. We prayed together, calling upon God for forgiveness, restoration, and guidance in the future. I cannot tell you what became of Gomer.

Here is the verse from Hosea that means the most to me:

⁶ *For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,
the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.*

This tells us that God wants our love, not for us to suffer. And God wants us to know him, rather than offering him rituals. In the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 9, the Pharisees accuse Jesus of sinning because he chooses to eat with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus then quotes this verse, telling the Pharisees that they need to go study their own Scriptures carefully. Jesus says to the Pharisees:

*“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.
¹³ Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”*

Often one of the most beautiful aspects of the Old Testament has to do with its literary and poetic nature. When spiritual truths are taught this way, they resonate with us deeply. Hosea from the Book of the Twelve is a great example of this. When it comes to the story of Hosea, I don’t think his book describes three real children of his. The story of his family is simply an allegory that he spins about his own life so that he can make a powerful spiritual point.