

Let's Get Real – Pent+7C -- Hosea

What constitutes betrayal? Where do our allegiances lie? When is it ethical to say one thing and do another? Each of us runs into these questions over the course of a lifetime, and one could make a case for happiness being the state of answering them well. If we are fortunate, we have help: parents and grandparents, friends and relations, mentors and teachers, heroes and muses all can contribute to a richly thoughtful and satisfying life. But ultimately, our decisions are our own. All of the influencers just mentioned can propagate poor decisions as well as felicitous ones, leading to violence and anguish as readily as to peace and happiness. And it is the case that being our best selves sometimes means making do with less pleasure, being physically uncomfortable and, let's face it, suffering.

If we are truly to live, we must look to a greater good. For selfish reasons: 1: The lesser good will always fail us eventually. And 2: For humanity to survive without destroying ourselves and our environment. Looking to a greater good means having faith that whatever suffering we do in pursuit of such a goal is worthwhile. By this, the enterprise of faith seems simply logical: Believe so all can live. Disbelief is destruction. Simple. Logical. Yet how many reach the maturity required for such an attitude and outlook?

As we continue reading Paul's letter to the Colossians, this reality comes to the fore: "When you were buried you were also raised through faith in the power of God." In other words, die to self in order that you may live. "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition." One might expand on those ideas to include false advertising, built-in obsolescence, brutal and xenophobic so-called patriotism, etc. Paul goes on to include among the demons, "the elemental spirits of the universe, who are not Christ." But our responsibilities as stewards of Creation include learning more about ourselves and God and righteousness as we go along. So, for example, it is now clear that the elemental spirits of the universe are indeed Christ. Reality is indeed the nature of God, who is the head of every ruler and authority. There is a delightful Polish euphemism, used when one wants

to refer to “the facilities” as we say, or, as my campmates and I during summers in the Ozark mountains called the necessary building, “St. Louis.” The Poles say, “*Tam gdzie król piechota chadza;*” Where even the king has to go on foot. Reality indeed.

And speaking of euphemisms. This brings us to Hosea. Hosea is the only one to have written down a prophecy during the middle years of the 8th century (BCE) in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. He was a contemporary of Amos, but Amos was from the Southern Kingdom. For numerous cultural reasons, the fertility gods of the Canaanites were as commonly worshiped in the North as was the God of the Fathers, YHWH. While Amos addressed the consequences of that admixture of loyalties, Hosea’s project was to name and denounce Baal worship as the force behind the Northern Kingdom’s decline.

In this book, Chapters 1-3 summarize the key elements of the prophet’s message of judgment and grace in the metaphor of Hosea’s marriage to Gomer. Chapters 4-14 convey the same message in a more clearly defined progression. Chapter 11 (ironically enough) is an affirmation of God’s grace, while chapters 12-14 proclaim the possibility of newness and restoration, with a call to repentance based on God’s grace. This highly organized structure demands that any element of the book of Hosea be taken in its whole context. So, if we are to absorb whatever lesson Hosea has to teach us today, we must look at the whole book.

Even for us, who are used to and good at grasping the metaphorical power of biblical texts, from Genesis to Revelation, the illustration of Hosea’s slatternly wife and her infidelity as the root of all their problems is hard to take. From what we know about the second-rate status and almost total lack of self-determination afforded women in ancient times, a more powerful and believable story for us would be about an unfaithful and badly behaved man than a woman. There may be wisdom in the simile; here it is buried deep. But the message of the prophet does not depend on how we conduct specific investigations about Hosea and Gomer’s relationship. The events caused by their dysfunction and separation are simply the setting for Hosea’s graphic portrayal of the

disconnect between Israel and God, and what God plans to do about it. In today's terms, we might say that Hosea is describing what happens to a people who attempt to live outside the limits of truth and natural history.

So our first job is to move past what we might decide to think about someone who wanders away from her marriage and entertains other partners, in order to get to the point of Hosea's narrative, which has nothing to do with sexuality, and everything to do with the aftermath of betrayal. What the prophet is really talking about is the people of Israel's betrayal of the one God, the Creator of Heaven and Earth. In other words, what happens when that nation began to make its decisions and adopt its frame of reference and forms of idolatry based on falsehood, fear and unfairness (Baal worship) instead of truth, courage and charity (YHWH worship). In cosmic terms, they are living in a dream world, where reality, history and lovingkindness are ignored and only pleasure, luxury and power matter.

Anyone who has ever participated in any kind of true commitment to anything knows that dreamworld approach proves, sooner or later, catastrophic. Anyone who has ever experienced betrayal knows the feeling of having a reality created between two people (or two parties) evaporate, like a puddle in the sun, and be replaced by emptiness and outrage. But, like Hosea and Gomer, the circumstances of a given commitment can be suspect; can be shaky; can be downright confounded. In these cases, what seems like betrayal may, in truth be the unveiling of a deeper truth, and not wrong. In the case of the Northern Israelites wandering off to worship Baal, Hosea's example is one of true betrayal: abandonment of the good by the false, wherein wrongness carries the day.

In his column yesterday, Roger Cohen describes this situation further in a contemporary context. He quotes Daniel Moynihan: "Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not to his own facts." What has developed, writes Cohen, is a situation where everyone is entitled to his own facts; facts don't matter. The bald-faced lie is perfectly acceptable, so long as it keeps you at the center of what passes today for attention. The important thing is to feed the machine. Shock is the best fodder. In

the mid-1930s, a few years before World War II, Robert Musil, the author of 'The Man Without Qualities' wrote, 'No culture can rest on a crooked relationship to truth.' And when a people are suffering from this illness, there is no way to avert disasters, nor to shift blame from the societies themselves."

In Hosea, as is the custom in many a biblical text, the proper names given to characters contain clues, or outright statements as to the intention of the prophet. Thus the name Hosea means Salvation. We can assume that what happens to him describes the nature of salvation in God. Gomer means complete, which we might say implies that her story contains the whole story of humanity. Thus the relationship between Salvation (God) and Completeness (All of humanity) is the subject of this story.

They have three children: first, *Jezreel* (May God Give Seed) describes the possible outcome of our relationship to God. But the name contains a bitter irony, in that the Valley of Jezreel had already been the site of horrible violence and human failure by the time Hosea used the name. In other words, 'You had your chance and you blew it.'

The second child, a daughter, is called *Lo-Ruhamah*, or 'Not Pitied.' This is not to say that God has no pity, because Hosea goes on to speak of the forgiveness and redemption that are always offered by God to those who turn and repent. But those who continue to defy reality and spurn truth will continue to suffer the consequences of their ways. Reality will not alter itself to fit their destructive thoughtlessness. On the contrary, if they keep it up, they live into the identity of the third and last child of Gomer and Hosea, *Lo-Ammi*, which translates, 'Not My People.' Thus the book is an allegory for what happens to a person or a people who wander off into the wilderness of ignorance, cold-heartedness and self-interest: it is not that they are damned and must burn forever. They are simply out of the conversation. They had a chance, their repeated defiance of natural law renders them unpitiable, and they just aren't people anymore. Tough stuff, but fair. Nevertheless, it is vital for us to carry through to the end of the story, even though we only read one Torah portion today. Yes, if one's course is not changed, the

consequences will consume the individual, and the nation. But God is sovereign Creator; we are responsible to God for our actions in Creation, and such a course is not inevitable; otherwise the calls to repentance and promises of a better future that are a mark of the prophets would have little meaning. God's compassion is neither automatic nor without parameters, but it is boundless. Our behaviors do not cause God's grace. God will not force people to respond, but if they do, they will be saved without hesitation.

Our response is not just to be grateful or to worship, although that is part of the deal. Our aim is to have the relationship lived out in all areas of life, to live in the context of a benevolent power in the Universe that moves us to compassion, charity and lovingkindness. It is from this basis that *Torah* so emphasizes ethical living while our lives last.

Here is a poem by Evelyn Wadsworth that describes such a state:

The thread of life is filling with the hours,
Each one a slipping, multicolored bead.
Who knows what lies beyond the clasping,
Or where the shining silver thread will lead?
We only know we strive to make them perfect,
Each symmetric, full and gay;
Well knowing that, beyond the radiant center,
The other half will dwindle fast away.