

Love and Loss

Hosea 2:14-23

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*Good morning heartache
You old gloomy sight
Good morning heartache
Thought we said goodbye last night
I turned and tossed until it seems you have gone
But here you are with the dawn
Wish I could forget you, but you're here to stay
It seems I met you when my love went away
Now every day I stop, I'm saying to you
Good morning heartache, what's new?
(Dan Fisher, Irene Higgenbotham, Ervin Drake)
Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away,
Now it looks as though they're here to stay,
Oh, I believe in yesterday.
Suddenly, I'm not half the man I used to be,
There's a shadow hanging over me,
Oh, yesterday came suddenly.
Why she had to go I don't know, she wouldn't say.
I said something wrong, now I long for yesterday.
(John Lennon, Paul McCartney)
The night is bitter,
The stars have lost their glitter;
The winds grow colder
And suddenly you're older -
And all because of the man that got away.
No more his eager call,
The writing's on the wall;
The dreams you dreamed have all
Gone astray.
The man that won you
Has gone off and undone you.
That great beginning
Has seen the final inning.
Don't know what happened. It's all a crazy game!*

(Ira Gershwin)

There is a company called Despair, Inc. that sells Valentine's candies called Bittersweets. You can buy the "Dejection" assortment of little candy hearts with messages printed on them that say things like "We Had Plans" or "Table for 1" or "Peaked at 17."

On Valentine's Day some celebrate being with the one they love, but there are probably just as many who think of those they have lost—to death, to circumstance, to someone else. Sometimes we feel the depth of our love for someone most keenly when that person is gone. I

want you to get in touch with those feelings, because I want you to imagine God with those same feelings toward you.

The prophets of the Old Testament are not afraid to portray God as a brokenhearted lover. Oh, he can be angry, too, as the brokenhearted often are. God can be jealous. He has his moments of wanting to turn away from the sight of us. But the truth about God is that God longs for us to come back even after we have walked away.

Nobody says that more dramatically than Hosea. The first thing Yahweh said when he began speaking to Israel through Hosea is “Go marry a prostitute.” It may be that Hosea fell in love with a woman who was working as a prostitute in the temples of the fertility religion of Ba’al, which operated in Israel at the time. It may be that he married a nice girl who turned out to be unfaithful and became a prostitute. But this is the way Hosea tells the story later on: God told me, Go marry a prostitute and have children from her that are not your own, because that way you can experience what I am experiencing as the God of Israel.

The message of Hosea is that God feels toward his people what a husband feels like when his wife is a hooker. God was in a covenant relationship with Israel. God had promised his faithful love, and in return expected faithfulness. But God’s people had cheated on him, going after other gods. In Hosea’s time it was the fertility gods that attracted the people of Israel because of the promise of rain and crops, a kind of prosperity gospel for their time, and it was complicated by the fact that some of the rituals involved using human sexual energy to act out the divine energy of fertilizing the earth. We today may cheat on God with other lower-case gods, worshiping other things as our ultimate concerns. When Jesus writes a letter to the early church in Ephesus in the book of Revelation (2:4) he says simply, “You have lost your first love.” “You’ve lost that loving feeling...It makes me just feel like crying, ‘cause baby, something inside you is dying” (P. Spector, B. Mann, C. Well).

Hosea the prophet married a woman named Gomer—who was either a prostitute when they married, or became one. The children she gave birth to were named to communicate the prophet’s message. The first was named Jezreel, after the valley that had been the scene of a massacre which would be avenged. But it got worse. The second child, a girl, was named “Not Loved” or “No Mercy,” and the third child, a son, was named “Not My People.” That was how God felt about Israel at this point, Hosea was saying. And he goes on in chapter two to announce judgments against the nation. But the goal of these judgments is to bring Israel back into a love relationship.

Beginning with 2:14—where Kay started reading—Yahweh says that he is going to win Israel back as his lover. They will go back into the desert where their union was first formed. He will turn the Valley of Trouble (which they came through going into the Promised Land) into a gateway of hope. No longer will they think of God as “master,” which is the meaning of the word ba’al; they will think of God as a faithful husband. God will bless his people with peace, safety, righteousness, justice, unfailing love, and compassion. Then he will change the names he has given the people in judgment. Jezreel, which means “God scatters,” can also mean “God plants,” and the grain, grapes, and olives will grow. Those he has labeled “Not Loved” will then be called “Loved,” and to those labeled “Not My People,” Yahweh will say “You are my people.”

Here’s the message to Israel and to us: even though you have turned away from me, even if you no longer love me with all your heart, I will not stop loving you. Even if you cheat on me by living your life as if I did not exist, I the Lord will never live as if you did not exist. I may cause trouble for you to get you to the desert where I can talk with you alone. But I will never

stop loving you, even if you prostitute yourself with the gods of this world. God says to his prostituted people: I will make you my wife forever.

In our human relationships, if someone is unfaithful to us, we don't feel we are required to be faithful to them anymore. Even Jesus said that unfaithfulness is grounds for divorce. But not so with God. There is a promise in 2 Timothy 2:13 that I found startling: "If we are unfaithful, God remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself." It is God's nature to be faithful to us. God will never deny those who are in a covenant with him, even if we deny him. If we turn away from him, God will still seek to win us back to a love relationship with himself. Nothing we ever do can separate us from God's love.

The climax of the book of Romans is this one sentence that we heard earlier: "I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (8:38-39 NIV).

The German-American theologian Paul Tillich wrote fifty years ago:

These words are among the most powerful ever written. Their sound is able to grasp human souls in desperate situations. In my own experience they have proved to be stronger than the sound of exploding shells, of weeping at open graves, of the sighs of the sick, of the moaning of the dying. They are stronger than the self-accusation of those who are in despair about themselves and they prevail over the permanent whisper of anxiety in the depth of our being [The New Being, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955, ch. 7].

That's the power of knowing that nothing that you have ever done can any longer come between you and God. That's the power of knowing that no force at work in the world can keep God's love away. Baptists sometimes talk about the doctrine of "the perseverance of the saints," meaning that believers will endure to the end and be saved. But John Stott has suggested that we should change the name of the doctrine to "the perseverance of God." It is God who perseveres, not us. It is God who will not let us go. An old hymn says it well:

*Let me no more my comfort draw
From my frail hold of Thee;
In this alone rejoice with awe—
Thy mighty grasp of me.* (John Campbell Shairp)

I wish we could convince ourselves—and then the world—that God's love will not give up on us. I met a woman in New York on Thursday named Terry Troia, a Reformed Church pastor, who has been working for 30 years among the homeless on Staten Island. I hope she'll be coming to preach at Harbor Church. One of the groups Terry discovered long ago living under bridges was a group of about 30 transgendered youth who had been kicked out of their homes. She got to know one young woman named Tanisha who had grown up a boy and been run out her hometown in Pennsylvania because she had HIV. This was in the eighties, when people were very afraid, and although *pro bono* lawyers had appealed it all the way to the Supreme Court, the case had not been heard. Tanisha wound up in Staten Island with some other people who were in the same boat. Pastor Terry accepted her and began to tell her about God's love, and Tanisha became less fearful and became a leader in organizing the other transgendered youth and getting help for them.

One time when Tanisha was sick, Terry noticed that she was wearing a man's flannel shirt. She asked why. Tanisha said that she was afraid she might die, and she knew that God would be unhappy if he saw her in woman's clothes. This is what she had been taught. Terry explained again that she was sure that God did not care what clothes she was wearing, that God loved her as she was. Tanisha became stronger and worked with Terry until she came to her last

illness. In her weakness, her faith faltered and she put on that flannel shirt again, because she was afraid. After she died, Terry was preparing for the funeral and took Tanisha's Bible and flipped through it—as I have often done, looking for a favorite verse or a promise the deceased had held onto. In the whole Bible she only found one verse that Tanisha had underlined, and it was underlined in red. It was Leviticus 18:22, “You shall not lie with a man as with a woman.”

All those promises of God's love and mercy, all the passages you can hold onto when you are dying, and Tanisha had marked in her Bible those words of condemnation. Oh, that we could convince ourselves—and then the world—that God's love will not give up on us. There may be some words of condemnation you have taken to heart. Perhaps someone has even told you that God will no longer accept you. It is not true. God is the heartbroken lover who longs to get you into the desert where he can speak tenderly to you. There is nothing in all the world that can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. His love will never let you go.