

Come Back to Me
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
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Hosea 11:1-9, Mark 10:13-14

Sometimes metaphors rub us the wrong way. That was my epiphany this week, as I sat and tried to think about what to say about this passage from the Prophet Hosea in which he compares God to a parent and us as God's children.

It's a beautiful poetic metaphor, but I struggled with it because it seems to me the metaphor only works if our experience of a parent and child relationship was consistently healthy and whole. For too many, that's just not the case.

In the foster-care parenting classes Clark and I are taking, in the stories of friends and neighbors who I love dearly, in my own history of parenting and being parented... it's not easy. Experiences of grief, loss and trauma between a parent and a child can easily overwhelm. It can be one of the most challenging relationships that we know.

But I've also learned that pretending that something difficult hasn't happened can be damaging too.

Sometimes we need to stop talking about our philosophies of God and give this vast, unknowable presence and power some language that will make sense. We need something to hold onto that has skin on. So we use human metaphors to talk about how it sometimes can be between us humans and God.

If we believe that somehow God brought us to being, we may also believe that God loves us, and that God wishes to nurture and teach us and instill in us a sense of what it is to be just and righteous people.

And if we carry this metaphor to its logical conclusions, it also stands to reason that, at times, just like a real life parent and child... we probably drive God completely mad, we infuriate God, we sadden God, we test God's patience.

Israel in the 8th century BCE was at a crossroads... to continue with our metaphor, it had been behaving something like a recalcitrant, rebellious teenager. The northern and southern kingdoms had split—

Israel in the north, Judah in the south. It was a time of political unrest and intrigue: most who took the throne in this period were assassinated or died violently. The great powers of Egypt and Assyria threatened to attack at any moment.

But the people were not turning to God, or God's prophets for solutions to their problems... in fact, the people were looking to other gods and rituals in their anxiety over the state of world affairs. Because sometimes, anything but the gods of our mothers and fathers will do.

The prophet Hosea spends time trying to persuade the people of Israel to change their ways and return to God.

Despite the fact that all of the nurturing activities described in the passage are carried out by mothers AND fathers today... in the time of Hosea, these were solely the responsibility of the mother. This is one of those rare motherly images of God in scripture.

God-as-Parent loves the child, teaches him to walk. The parent picks the child up in her arms, and leads him gently—not with shackles or chains, like a prisoner or a slave, but with bands consisting solely of love and human kindness. The parent lifts the child tenderly, holds him to her cheek. She bends down to the child... gets down on their level... and feeds the child.

Abruptly, the content of the passage changes and speaks to their current situation. The sword rages, violence is devouring the cities, and despite all this, they will not return to God. The people will go back to Egypt, back into slavery, or fall into the hands of Assyria. Not as some kind of cosmic punishment, but as the natural consequences of their actions.

And that is the part of parenting that is surely the most difficult, the part that makes all-nighters with fussy babies look like a cakewalk... allowing natural consequences to take their course.

It's like when you tell a young child to bring their bike in from the rain, but they aren't listening or they forget and the next morning they discover that it has been stolen. They have done X, therefore Y follows. And maybe next time, they will have learned the lesson.

But when it comes to brutal punishment, it turns out that is a line that God cannot cross. God can't bear the thought of her children's destruction. God says, *"My heart won't let me do it. My compassion won't let me do it."*

No doubt, given the violence of terror attacks in the world this week, that there will be those who rail at God saying "How could God let this happen?" But it's not God's job to stop such things. Defying evil is humanity's job. Hosea shows us God's tender and very real love and pain. The promise is that despite pain, God will redeem. God will heal. And God will bring to new life. Lord in your mercy.

As we turn the pages of the newspaper to read about our society's love affair with violence, not to mention the plight of refugees and victims of war who are also fleeing violence around the world...as we turn on the nightly news or drive down our city streets... we see real human suffering. I hope that we can remember that WHO GOD IS AT THE CORE rebels against it. And it is our job to bring peace.

Violence exists, and God does not intervene in the laws of nature to prevent it. God is like a parent who allows the results of her children's actions to play out, actions that are loving and healing OR violent and careless. Perhaps that is because it is our job to show one another the kind of love God has shown us... tenderness, caring, nurturing, teaching, unconditional. Bringing mercy instead of vengeance. Giving bread instead of bombs.

And when we do suffer, it is God who, like a good parent, lifts us up, heals us, comforts us, and never leaves our side.

Being a parent is hard. I imagine that all God wants from us and for us is the same thing any good and loving parent wants... for us to thrive and learn and grow into that which we were created to be... children made in God's own image, the very image of compassion and unconditional love.

What greater joy can a parent have than to hear, "Isn't he just the image of his father?" "Doesn't she remind you of her mother?" God our parent longs to look upon our faces, and see her own reflected there.

We sing a song in PF sometimes that captures this longing... it's called Hosea... the Echo song. I've asked Brian to gather some of our friends and help me sing it. And I hope that once you catch the tune, you'll join in too. Come back to me...