

I

Someone once said that being a parent is like taking your heart out of your chest and letting it walk around. I've only been a parent for a little more than eight years, but I have found that sentiment to be true. Being a parent to my three sons is the best and the hardest job I have ever had.

Even though they're getting older, our boys still love hearing stories about when they were babies. They of course don't remember their first ride in a car, or the joy their mother and I felt watching them take their first steps, or the one time we had a class five diaper emergency at an Oklahoma truck stop. But their mother and I will never forget those things.

I love my sons so very deeply. But to be honest, I love my sons so deeply that it makes me a little bit frightened, because to love deeply is to risk the possibility of being hurt deeply.

II

There is a risk to love, isn't there? To love someone, to really love them in a deep, intimate way, exposes us. To love someone make us vulnerable to the possibility to being hurt. To love someone exposes us to the possibility of that love not being reciprocated, or even outright rejected. Real love always involves real risks.

III

And that brings us to our text for this morning. If you've been worshipping

with us this Fall, you know that we've been tracing the broad arc of the Hebrew Scriptures, more commonly called the Old Testament. For the last few weeks, we've been reading about the kings of ancient Israel.

About 1,000 years before the birth of Christ, King David united the 12 tribes of Israel into a unified, independent nation, and established Jerusalem as its political, military, and religious capital.

However, the unity of the nation did not last long, and within a few generations, the kingdom had split in two. Ten of the twelve tribes broke away to form the Northern Kingdom and called themselves "Israel," and the two remaining tribes of Judah and Benjamin formed the Southern Kingdom and took the name "Judah."

Our story this morning is centered on the Northern Kingdom of Israel about 750 years before the birth of Christ, and things are not going very well for the people of God or for their kings. But don't take my word for it. Listen to how the Bible describes this period in our ancestors' history in the book of Second Kings:

They did wicked things, provoking the Lord to anger; they served idols, of which the Lord had said to them, "You shall not do this." Yet the Lord warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer, saying, "Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my statutes, in accordance with all the law that I commanded your ancestors

and that I sent to you by my servants the prophets.” They would not listen but were stubborn, as their ancestors had been, who did not believe in the Lord their God. They despised his statutes, and his covenant that he made with their ancestors, and the warnings that he gave them. They went after false idols and became false; they followed the nations that were around them, concerning whom the Lord had commanded them that they should not do as they did. They rejected all the commandments of the Lord their God and made for themselves cast images of two calves; they made a sacred pole, worshiped all the host of heaven, and served Baal. They made their sons and their daughters pass through fire; they used divination and augury; and they sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking him to anger.

This past summer, we did a ten-week series on the Ten Commandments, and we described the Commandments as God’s framework for building a just and moral society. What is the first commandment? I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before me. And what is the second commandment? You shall not make for yourself any idol – you shall not bow down to them or worship them.

But here are the people of God, with the king’s explicit endorsement and encouragement, openly violating commandments. And God is not just angry. God is hurt. And that brings us to the prophet Hosea.

Oftentimes we think of prophets as forecasters of future events. But the primary task of a prophet is to speak God’s truth to God’s people. And that’s what’s happening in today’s text. So listen now for a Word from God from Hosea 11:1-9.

*When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son.*

*The more I called them,
the more they went from me;
they kept sacrificing to the Baals,
and offering incense to idols.*

Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk,

I took them up in my arms;

but they did not know that I healed them.

I led them with cords of human kindness,

with bands of love.

I was to them like those

who lift infants to their cheeks.

I bent down to them and fed them.

*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.

My people are bent on turning away from me.

*To the Most High they call,
but he does not raise them up at all.*

How can I give you up, Ephraim?

How can I hand you over, O Israel?

How can I make you like Admah?

How can I treat you like Zeboiim?

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.*

Real love always risks real vulnerability. To love someone opens you up to the possibility of being hurt, of being disappointed, of being heartbroken.

And through the voice of the prophet Hosea, we hear the heartbreak in the voice of God. For God has loved God's people like a parent loves a child, but that love has not been returned. God has called, only to have God's people have run away.

And this is not the first time. Generation after generation has refused to follow God's commandments and worship God alone.

And if we listen closely to the voice of God through the prophet Hosea, for a moment, God seriously contemplates being done with the whole thing. Sometimes, the hurt is so great, the disappointment is so sharp, the risk for further heartbreak is so real, that the safe play is to just be done.

And sometimes, in human relationships, that is the smart play. Sometimes, in human relationships, the best thing is to cut our losses and protect whatever shreds of our hearts are left.

Maybe you've been there. Maybe you are there. Despite all of your efforts, despite all of your heartbreak and disappointment, despite all of your pleading with your loved one, you've decided that for your own safety, you need to be done.

Sometimes, that happens in human relationships, and when it does, it is so incredibly painful and heartbreaking. If you've been through are or going through such a devastating, painful season, I hope you'll remember that God has been where you are.

God has been in that place of heartbreak and disappointment, of having our worst fears of vulnerability realized. To love is to risk being hurt. And if you are suffering from a broken

heart this morning, my friend, God's heart is broken right along with yours.

Sometimes, the smart, safe play in a human relationship is to just be done. But there's a piece of this text that catches my ear, and I wonder if it caught your ear, too. God says, "I am God and no mortal."

God is not human. And as Scripture tells us, "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom."

And so because God is God, God charges when everyone else retreats.

Because God is God, God goes all-in when everyone else folds.

Because God is God, God chooses the cross when everyone else cuts and runs. "I am God, and no mortal," says the Lord. And thanks be to God for that.

IV

My friend, I don't know whether or not you've been running away from God lately. But I know this. God will not quit you. Not ever.

God has decided that you are worth the risk. You are worth the vulnerability. God has decided that you are worthy of love and redemption – not because of anything you have said or done or not said or done, but simply because God is God, and no mortal.

I have three sons, whom I love fiercely and deeply and for whom, if it came to it, would gladly trade my life for theirs. But here's a part of Scripture I just don't understand. God so loves me,

and God so loves you, and God so loves everyone born in this world, as broken prone to sin and breaking God's heart as we are, that God gives God's *only* Son, that whosoever believes in him might not perish, but have life eternal, and life abundant.

I just don't get that kind of generosity. I just don't get that kind of grace. It doesn't make sense to me. But it doesn't have to – because God is God, and you and I are not.

So you need not run and hide from God, my friend. You can stop your rebelling. You can stop your fighting. Because God has made up God's mind about you, and there is nothing, neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers nor things present nor things to come nor powers nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation that can ever separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. That's why they call it Good News.

V

And that, I think, has some real implications for how we live out our lives together in this thing we call the church.

Because if God won't quit us, then that means that there is no sin that is beyond God's forgiving.

If God won't quit us, then that means there is no hurt that is beyond God's healing.

If God won't quit us, then it means that there is no death that is beyond God's resurrecting.

If God is willing to take a risk on us, then we can risk welcoming the stranger, even when the safe play might be to close the door.

If God is willing to take a risk on us, then we can risk raising our voices for the sake of righteousness and justice, even when the safe play might be to keep our mouths shut and our heads down.

If is willing to take a risk on us, then we can risk loving our neighbors, yes, even those neighbors who look, think, vote, and worship differently than we do, knowing full well that we risk having the love we show them thrown back in our faces.

If God is willing to love us in spite of the risk of a broken heart, then even if the very gates of hell itself should come against us, we can embody bold, risky, foolishly generous love, the love made known to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.