

Made Alive Together with Him

Hosea 1:2-9
Colossians 2:6-15

Commentator George Adam Smith called Hosea “the most sublime and sensitive of the prophets. His words never lose their focus on the redeeming love of Yahweh.” The Book of Hosea certainly does not seem to start out in agreement with this description. The Lord tells Hosea to take a harlot for a wife. She has a child. Hosea does not tell us whether he is the father. Next the Lord tells Hosea to name the child Jezreel, after a valley in which the Israelite army under King Jehu will suffer a crushing loss. Hosea does not tell us who the victor will be. Next Gomer (what a name) conceives again and bears a daughter. The Lord tells Hosea to name her Not Pitied, “for I will no more have pity on the house of Israel, or forgive them at all.” By now we detect that in this piece of performance theater Hosea represents the Lord, while his family represents Israel. Hosea does not tell us who Not Pitied's father is.

The Lord reiterates he will no longer deliver the children of Israel. Then Gomer conceives a third time (still not sure who this one's father is). This son the Lord tells Hosea to name Not My People, just to make sure to rub in the bad news yet more completely. I have long known I have no wish to become a prophet. But Hosea's gig has to be the worst. At its best, prophecy means speaking the kind of truth to power that draws power's wrath. When King Jehu gets wind of Hosea's prophecy he tries to get him assassinated. Yet Hosea must also turn his personal life into a very public

humiliation. He must marry a harlot. He must give his children Hebrew words for names that are not names. They are threats.

Where does George Adam Smith get off calling Hosea sublime and sensitive, never losing focus on the love of God? He can write this in part precisely because of this most unpromising opening chapter. He can because this prophecy—and virtually every other in the book—is directly followed by a renewal of the covenant promises of God. I do not know why the Common Lectionary cuts off this passage after verse nine. Verse ten opens, “Yet the number of the people of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea...” The people have turned away from the Lord. They have ignored the law. They have broken the covenant. And the Lord fully intends to hold them accountable. Yet after that reckoning occurs the Lord will renew the covenant. They *will* receive forgiveness. The Lord *will* deliver them.

When a young man of our acquaintance reached the ninth grade he finally reached a level that made him work to learn and to earn good grades. Though he had been in a gifted and talented program for six years, he had never before had to do much more than complete the occasional project and just show up for class. He had no study skills and struggled to keep up with his friends. He grew frustrated and started acting out in class. Three separate teachers wrote him up to the vice principal. She contacted his parents and asked for a conference. They came in and heard about their son standing on his chair and yelling, about him growing sullen and withdrawn from them and from his peers.

The vice principal said something along the lines of, “Now normally, when students behave this way, we require they stay after school for detention. But since your son has no trouble on his record, we can let him off with just a serious explanation of our expectations.” The parents looked at each other, then back at the vice principal, “No,” the father said, “throw the book at him.” The mother said something about him needing to accept the consequences of his actions. And the vice principal looked at Linda and me and said, “Really?!?” We nodded. She said, “Well. I don't know what to say. I'm not sure I can remember parents ever saying that before.” We still strongly believe we did the right thing. Our son did his detention, during which he had the privilege of helping a custodian clean out the band room closet, a notorious thicket of coats and folders and God knows what. He got his act together—with a little help from us but mostly on his own—and has done very well in school ever since. In fact, he is earning some more initials after his name even as we speak.

This is the pattern we find in both Hosea and Colossians. God has blessed us with every blessing. God has also given us reasonably clear guidance on how to behave. As Paul writes in Colossians, “As you therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so live in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.” By receiving Christ he means accepting his Lordship. He means letting those roots of faith grow. But his main point here is that once we accept the deal, we need to abide by it. *Live* in him. Just as we were taught. In Christ God has entered into the new and final covenant with us. Now we need to live out our faith. We need to love one another, and the least in our midst, with

Christlike love. We need to make it real. Tangible.

Both Hosea and Paul follow the same template. God has entered into covenant with God's people. God has instructed them how to behave. They misbehave. God holds them accountable. Eventually though, out of steadfast love God forgives and delivers the people. Before, however, we jump ahead to practical applications of this template, Paul has a few things to say about Christ and living *in him*. First, we must guard against misdirection from philosophy, human tradition and “the elemental spirits of the universe”. Paul certainly had no problem with philosophy per se. The word comes from the Greek and is a compound noun made up of the words “lover” and “wisdom”. Paul loved wisdom. He did not love certain philosophies which he saw as contradictory to the Word from the Lord he believed he had received. This is made evident by his two further categories of “human tradition” and those elemental spirits. Keep your eyes on Jesus and listen to the truth about him, Paul means, and do not get seduced away by other philosophies, no matter how attractive they may appear.

The mother of actress Leah Remini brought her into the Scientology church when she was an eight-year-old girl. Among many twisted teachings, Scientologists believe children are more spiritual beings than their elders. (I guess they haven't spent much time around children.) They are lifted up within that community and, while they have no power over money or church policy, they are venerated almost to the point of worship. Remini left Scientology when her own daughter came to the age when this started happening for her. She feared how egotistical and demanding her

daughter was becoming. It caused her to, as she said in an interview with Sara Donnellan writing for US Magazine, “Open my eyes for the first time. I started looking at everything they teach and do from a new angle. And I just could not believe I had been so stupid. ***What was I thinking?!?***”

She had been captured by one of those human/elemental things that lure us by appealing to our weak spots. Scientology uses the self-centeredness of emotionally underdeveloped children and adults to draw them into a community that pretends to venerate them. Then they take their money and their ability to think freely and wisely. Certain Christian churches specialize in a guilt/discipline duality to do a very similar thing. Others have elevated self-help to a substitute for the Gospel's call to sacrificial service and radical inclusion of others. All in the name of Jesus.

But Christ is the real deal. Paul writes, “In him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.” Keep your focus on Jesus. He ***is*** the Lord God. In him we are given a spiritual circumcision. Circumcision is the ritual symbol that a particular male belongs to the people of God and therefore becomes an inheritor of the blessings of the covenant. But when we, male and female, accept Christ and live in him, we need nothing more. For in baptism we were buried with him. That is, in the sacrament that now dramatizes our acceptance into the people of God, we died ***to sin***. We still sin. We still must be held accountable for that. Yet “God has made (us) alive together with him.” He has forgiven our sin. He has canceled the bond. That bond, that piece of paper giving sin legal control over us, that law of God which we cannot perfectly keep,

has been canceled in Christ. He has made us alive together with him.

Now for those practical applications. Paul gives us our first one: to abound in thanksgiving. I have mentioned the concept of the one sentence prayer. One excellent such prayer is simply, "Thank you God". I can assure you I say that *every* time I finish a run. Not kidding. But I am trying to develop the habit of saying "Thank you God" all the time. When Linda forgives me. Again. When my dogs greet me so happily when I walk through the front door. When our elders show up for session and lead their committees and commissions with effectiveness. When Sarah Kelsheimer catches yet another of my errors. (She watches the video of our worship on Monday mornings. Hi Sarah! I will know when you reach this point in tomorrow's viewing. And thank you Sarah for liking my warped sense of humor.)

But seriously, abounding in thanksgiving does not have to be hard at all. Neither does our second application: to ask the Holy Spirit to protect us from the misdirections and lies that surround us. Neither does a third: that in obedience to God's prophetic words we seek to do justice and to make the love of God real for people who simply do not feel it. God has given us the rules. We break them. God does hold us accountable, but in the loving manner of parents wanting the best for their children. God forgives us. God has eternally re-established the covenant of grace with us. God guides us in ministry. Thank you God.