



And Yet, I Still Love You
Hosea 11:1-11
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Washington Street United Methodist Church
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Background Story

For most of our churches, we are full swing into the Vacation Bible School season. Last week my husband, who is the pastor at Chesterbrook UMC in McLean, went to help another pastor who's VBS director tested positive for COVID the day before VBS started. Next week my daughter will help with VBS at my husband's church. God bless all the parents, volunteers, pastors, and staff who work so diligently to make VBS a meaningful opportunity to encounter Jesus.

But let me be clear, even in my role as district staff focused on leadership and church vitality, I will preach, teach, consult, facilitate and coach with any of our churches, but I don't do VBS. I love children, but not like that. I have one child and my hair is already gray, and you want me to work with a room full of them...nope. I believe it takes a special kind of love to work with children. A love that can look past when they don't pay attention, or they don't listen or the won't stop when you say stop.

Engaging the Text

In today's text, the prophet Hosea is continuing to remind God's people, that if they do not turn from their sinful ways, they will experience what he describes as a return to Egypt, meaning a return to captivity, physical slavery and a life of hopelessness and despair. And despite Hosea's attempt to remind them of how God delivered Israel from Egypt, Israel refuses to remember their history and turn from their sinful ways.

In chapter 11, Hosea's shift the focus from the God/Israel relationship of Rescuer of an oppressed people to a more parental focused relationship with God as parent, and Israel as child. The shift in focus allows Hosea to remind Israel of their covenantal relationship with God, that will always override any notion of God bringing harm to God's people, despite what they do or don't do. That covenant is built on love, for God's love is unconditional. And yet, I still love you.

In Katheryn Chapman's work "Images of Loving Parent" we can imagine for ourselves all they ways is which God is to us, the Loving Parent. In the first four verses of Hosea 11, we see God's parental love described in five different ways:

1. God's love is creative. The ability to create life and have that life, that child, experience the love of a mother and/or father. Even if our understanding of parent

has shifted and expanded, love is still the driving force. My daughter will be 21 in January. She is a college student and spends most of the year on her own at school. How I parent now is not how I parented when she was five years old. There is much less yelling and much more conversation. Figuring out how to parent an adult requires creativity.

2. God's love is instructive. Through love we teach others how to be the best person they can be. When I served in Baltimore our vision for children and youth ministries was to "raise productive citizens in the world and mature Christians in the church". My responsibility as pastor was not to convince them how they should be, that was their parents' job, my role was to help them know who they should be.

3. God's love is tolerant and patient. Love requires allowing children to make mistakes and receive forgiveness. I have a niece who is differently abled and although she knows right from wrong, that won't stop her from doing what she shouldn't. And when she is caught is quick to exclaim, "I sowwy". Only to turn around and repeat the same behavior again. Sometimes 15 or 20 more times.

4. God's love is unconditional. Even when a child rebels, a parent still loves. A parent hates the behavior, the attitude, and the actions, but loves the child, despite it all. I grew up hearing my parents say things like, "I will slap the black off you!" (explain) It wasn't until I became a parent that I understood that impassioned statement to be an expression of love for me, but hatred of the behavior and not the other way around.

5. God's love is healing. The goal of a parent's love is always to restore a child to a place of wholeness. While living in Tennessee I taught parenting to incarcerated mothers, many of who constantly beat themselves up for the harm their life choices had inflicted on their children. Many had not been a 'parent' for several years as their children were care for by family or the system. They struggled with the realization that the goal of parenting is to create an environment for health and wholeness for their children. And the weight of the harmful and dangerous environment many of these mothers subjected their children to be a greater challenge than overcoming addiction.

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Conclusion

Yes, God still loves us. Verse 4 in our text today says, "I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love." And we today are still led, by a God whose love overarches our sin and overtakes our being.

We know the rest of the story. Ephraim (Israel) continued to resist and reject. They continued in the way of sin. But God had a vision and a promise. Restoration would come, but until then, God endures the heartbreaking experiences of watching the people God loves digging themselves deeper and deeper into a spiritual hole. But every chance we get to experience another day is God saying to us, "And Yet, I still Love you".

For me Vacation Bible School, is the journey that I am on to learn to love as God loves. To be the example of a 'parent' that models after the parent God is to us. Even if it's just for a few hours, for a few days. Honestly it is because of VBS that I am in ministry today. VBS in the inner city looks very different from what some of us may have experienced. For many kids who attend, it is the place where they are loved as God loves. My first connection to God's love came from watching the ladies that ran VBS love, and love creatively, instructively, with tolerance and patience, always unconditional even if corrective, and use love to heal.

And yet I still love you. May it be so now only in our lives, but in the lives of those we are privileged to show God's love. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit Amen.