

"HARLOTRY, HAPPINESS AND HOPE"  
HOSEA 1: 2-10

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University Church of Chicago  
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It has been a difficult couple of weeks for Chicagoans. Here it is, the middle of summer and we're worried, scared, perplexed, angry and cynical about the Bulls, the Bears, the Cubs most of all. The White Sox, bless their hearts, seem to be on a tear, and the Blackhawks' Stanley Cup is only a memory now. The Bulls didn't have chance at landing LeBron James, and now Jerry Reinsdorf is singing, "Phil Jackson, won't you please come home?" (Let the jazz band play appropriate background music at this point.) Lou Piniella has finally decided to hang up his ill-fitting baseball cap, and the new owners of the Cubs are wondering why they spent all that money on washed-up players.

And last week we learned that our impeached former governor, Rod Blagojevich, is not after all going to testify in his trial for corruption. The defense has rested and I think they are probably right: the prosecution did not prove that Blago did anything illegal. Stupid, egomaniacal, scandalous. But not illegal. The ex-governor confessed that he has learned one thing from all this: "I talk too much." Oh really?

So, how do we who love sports and talk endlessly about politics and corruption and have so little to feel good about in Chicago put all this in focus?

Once upon a time, Groucho Marx asked Chico, "Where are we?" And Chico replied, "You can't fool me--we're right here!"

Right here may not be the best place to be, but it's where God has put us. So, we have to go on trying to hold many ideas, changes and hopes in tension at the same time. The key to being able to do many things at once is not brilliance or electronic wizardry or even terrifying efficiency--the key to that ability is **focus**. And what is focus? The integration of peripheral vision.

One of the most focused people in the Bible is the prophet Hosea. He had to be, because he lived a tragic life and the story that he wrote as a result of that life is filled with symbolism and imagery that point to grace and hope. Hosea married a woman named Gomer, and they had three children.

When I baptize a baby, I almost always say something about the meaning of the name that is given to the child. The name, whether chosen because we like the sound of it or it's a family name or we found it in a book or it's the name of a hero, still has significance.

Hosea names his children with appellations that describe the larger relationship of Israel to God. The names were significant to the prophet, but I doubt that they made his children popular when the roll was called at school. Jezreel, the firstborn is named to address the

problem of security. The name means that God gives fertility, growth, opportunity. But with fertility can also come promiscuity and denial of blessing. The second child, a daughter, is named Lo-ruhamah, which means "no mercy" or "not-pitied." By this time, Hosea seems to be questioning God's most fundamental attribute, grace and forgiveness. The third child, born out of the deteriorating relationship between Hosea and Gomer is named Lo-Ammi, "You are forsaken."

Gomer, the wife of Hosea and the mother of those three unfortunate children, was a prostitute, a harlot. And one day after they had been married for several years, she disappeared and returned to her former profession. Hosea was left alone to serve as parent to the children, to nurture them, to try to explain, I suppose, why their mother had fled.

The climactic moment in Hosea's life as well as his understanding of God's love and grace comes when he's walking through the marketplace one day and sees Gomer being sold as a slave. Overwhelmed by love, grace, pity and remorse, he goes and sells all that he has to buy back his own wife.

William Barclay used to say there are two great days in a person's life--the day we are born and the day we discover why. That moment comes for Hosea when he sees Gomer being sold as a woman to be used and abused, his own wife in all her degraded condition, and buys her back.

Hosea learns something else that day, something that guided his writing and preaching. C. S. Lewis once said that God whispers to us in our joys, speaks to us in our difficulties and shouts to us in our pain.

You and I are really good at rationalizing whatever circumstance we find ourselves in, at denying or suppressing the truth. Denis Waitley has pointed out that in a business setting, rationalization can function almost like group hypnosis, and the first one to snap out of the trance can often create quite an impact. For instance, years ago, in the early days of automobile travel, people were convinced that you couldn't drive in the winter. Around the middle of November, they used to put their cars up on blocks until spring, and all the automobile dealers would close down their businesses.

But there was one small Ford dealer from the middle of South Dakota who kept sending orders to Detroit all through the winter months. Ford's sales manager finally made a trip out to South Dakota to see what was going on. He discovered that the dealer was a big, awkward young fellow who was so naive and isolated that he'd never heard that you couldn't sell cars in the wintertime, so he just went ahead and sold them!

Once the word got out to other dealers that they'd better stop letting the weather dictate their closing hours, January became Ford's peak sales month.

Hosea comes to that moment when rationalizations no longer work, when excuses are thrown out the window as God confronts him with a new reality. Anger is mixed with guilt,

shame with hope, forgiveness with pain.

According to the prophet himself, he was labeled "a fool" and "a crazy fellow" by his friends as well as his opponents (9:7). What would you and I call a man who tells us that our nation is going to hell, that God's judgment is upon us and at the same time associates with promiscuous people? Seems like a simpleton to me.

"The best way to convince a fool that he is wrong is to let him have his own way," said Josh Billings. And God in divine wisdom often lets us have our way so that we can learn how foolish we really are without prayer, without submitting our prideful ways to God's leading.

Frederick Buechner has put this matter of foolishness into proper context: "People are free in this world to live for themselves alone if they want to and let the rest go hang, and they are free to live out the consequences as long as they can stand it. The doctrine of Hell proclaims that they retain this same freedom in whatever world comes next. Thus the possibility of making damned fools of ourselves would appear limitless."

Hosea examines his pain in the light of grace, and he calls Israel to look at its own foolishness. As William Sloane Coffin is fond of saying, "Our emotions don't have any digestive system." When we suppress or deny our feelings, they don't just go away. They return, perhaps in a different form, but they come back to be dealt with. Anger may go in and come out as depression, but it will make its reality known.

One of the most remarkable books I have read was written by Willard Gaylin, In **The Rage Within: Anger in Modern Life** he writes:

"Pain is inevitable, but misery is optional. We cannot avoid pain, but we can avoid joy. God has given us such immense freedom that God will allow us to be as miserable as we want to be.

"I know some people who spend their entire lives practicing being unhappy, diligently pursuing joylessness. They get more mileage from having people feel sorry for them than from choosing to live out their lives in the context of joy.

Joy is simple (not to be confused with easy). At any moment in life, we have at least two options, and one of them is to choose an attitude of gratitude, a posture of grace, a commitment to joy."

Maria von Wedemeyer and Dietrich Bonhoeffer fell in love; she was 18, he was 36 and already a world-famous theologian. It was 1939, and he began an underground seminary of The Confessing Church during Adolf Hitler's Third Reich. Bonhoeffer was jailed by the Nazis for his part in the July 20, 1944 plot on Hitler's life as well as for his strident opposition to their way of life.

While he was in prison, Maria and Dietrich wrote letters to each other, which Maria locked

away until after he was hanged on April 8, 1945, just a month before the end of the war. They have been collected in a marvelous book, **Love Letters From Cell 45**. In a May 1944 letter from Tegel, Bonhoeffer wrote to his fiancée:

"A blessing is the visible, perceptible, effective proximity of God. A blessing demands to be passed on--it communicates itself to other people. That someone should be a blessing is the greatest thing of all, isn't it? Not just a helpmate, or a companion or a friend, but a blessing. May that be how it is in our marriage."

If a blessing is indeed the visible, perceptible, effective proximity of God--and not just a gift from God--then God's evidence is all around us. But pay attention to the second half of Bonhoeffer's understanding of blessing. A blessing is not only the greatest thing of all--it also demands to be passed on.

Bishop Thomas Pryor, one of my mentors in the faith, used to end virtually every one of his prayers with the phrase: "O God, please continue to bless us and help us to be a blessing to others."

When, like Hosea, we come to realize how blessed we are, we then can begin to live as gracious blessings to others.