Topic: The Problem (Season of Pentecost 7, Lectionary C)
Scripture: Psalm 138, Hosea 1:2-10, Luke 11:1-13
Hymns: VU664 What a Friend, BB451 O Master Let Me Walk, BB189 Calvary Covers the Cost

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Let’s take a moment to pray…

Lord, before this world's days even began, your Word was in the beginning, and it was with you and it was you. The mystery of that brings us to our knees. Yet today you allow us to open your Word and know you better. So, we ask that you would give us eyes to see and ears to hear. Give us hearts open to your Spirit as we seek you. AMEN.

(SLIDE) I've always said that I loved to dig into problematic passages with Scripture... to wade into the passages that make people wince, or studder, or think hard about where they stand on it. Today's passage from Hosea is one of those - not the greatest offender mind you, but it's on the list for sure.

(SLIDE) "**When the Lord began to speak through Hosea, the Lord said to him, 'Go, marry a promiscuous woman and have children with her, for like an adulterous wife this land is guilty of unfaithfulness to the Lord'**". So, Hosea marries Gomer and they have three children.

(EM) So, you see the problem, right? How, why, would a good and just God order a man to marry a promiscuous woman? There's a second problem... would a morally upright prophet even obey such a command?

Marrying a promiscuous woman, from Hosea's perspective, would be tantamount to a scandal. It would end his credibility as a prophet. You'd head into the local hair dresser and the ladies in the chair would be all abuzz...(EM) "Did you hear about Hosea" "Giiirrl! That's no prophet of the Lord, he fixin' to get smote!"

He'd be in all the newspapers, you'd hear it from the street corners: "Extra Extra! Read all about it! God's prophet marries a harlot!" How could he claim to be upright, righteous, and a servant of the Law if he took a harlot as his wife? (SLIDE SLIDE)

There are three possible solutions to this, three different ways of looking at this difficult passage, that scholars have come up with. (SLIDE) First, is that Hosea... the whole book... is more of a parable than literal history.

The lesson of the parable would be that God's love, even for and despite sinful Israel, is absolute. But the tale is not to be taken literally, or even lightly. But there's a few issues with this. Isaiah and Jeremiah both have direct commands from God to His prophets and we do not treat those passages as a parables.

The style is the same there, but we don't treat them differently... so why treat Hosea differently? Ok, so how else can we think of this? Well, we can take it quite literally then. (SLIDE) God did, literally, command Hosea and Hosea quite literally obeyed. He married a promiscuous woman upon command from God regardless of the morality of it, regardless of how it looked, regardless of Levitical law regarding marriage and whatnot.

This upholds the lesson, for sure, that salvation justifies the sorrowful experience that Hosea endured in his doomed marriage. But there's a problem here, too. If Gomer was indeed a promiscuous woman before and during the marriage, this sets a poor comparison as Israel because that's the rub here. Hosea is a comparison for God, Gomer the comparison for Israel. As Hosea loves Gomer despite her flaws, God loves Israel despite hers.

There is one more way of looking at all this. (SLIDE) Scholars say Hosea married a good and upright woman who LATER BECAME promiscuous. This solves the problem of morality for the Prophet, the idea of Biblical marriage, and for all types in the story that are orbiting around each other.

But there IS a problem here, too... and it's right in that verse which kicked this all off (SLIDE OF VERSE 2). Hosea called her an adulteress and promiscuous right from the very start, in the very command itself. So Hosea's righteousness and Biblical marriage standards aren't upheld if Hosea knew she would be unfaithful.

Our Jewish brothers and sisters in faith treated books like Hosea, and Amos... the prophetic texts of the First Testament... in a special way. They were to be read, and re-read, as they were glimpses of the past which also spoke into the future of all believers. They brought the past into the future, a process of both "remembering" and of "shaping memories".

And so, when we read Hosea here we read about our God, who spoke to His prophet Hosea. We read that Israel was idolatrous at this time, and so God commands His prophet to take an adultress wife and have children with her.

We see the active comparison, the narrative tension, don't we? God, who becomes the husband to his bride Israel, taking her in. Freeing her from bondage and slavery, providing for her every need, setting her up in the marital home - the Promised Land. Yet, she betrays Him time and time again.

Entertaining other callers, Astharoths... Baals... foreign and pagan idols and sacrificing on interloper's alters. Hosea marries a promiscuous woman, knowing her past and yet loves her anyway. They are fruitful, and they multiply, and he sets up for her every need. Hosea takes her away from her promiscuous life yet she falls back into old ways.

She entertains other callers, regardless of how well Hosea provides for her and their children. The prophet's text holds this tension throughout 14 chapters, expounding in great detail the problem of sin and idolatry through the very real-life example of a marriage...

And the very spiritual example of us humans in relationship with Almighty God. Hosea's final chapter begins with the following verse... (SLIDE) "**Return, Israel, to the Lord your God. Your sins have been your downfall. Take words with you and return to the Lord. Say to Him: Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously...**"

Now doesn't that sound wonderful. (PAUSE) Actually, it sounds familiar, doesn it?
(LORD'S PRAYER)
OUR FATHER… who art in heaven… hallowed be Thy name… Thy kingdom come…. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven… Give us this day our daily bread… and Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us… And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil… For Thine is the kingdom… The power and the glory… Forever and ever. AMEN.

(SLIDE Luke 11:2-4c) Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us... this was the exact prayer Jesus taught when asked by one of His disciples about how to pray.

There is a problem here, too. The Disciples and Jesus, good Jews all, knew prayer to be a real and vital force in their lives. Jewish prayers already existed and they had a pattern. The Lord's Prayer follows the same pattern of Jewish prayer...

Until you get to the line "**Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us**". This line stands out of place. It runs against the pattern of Jewish prayer. Commentator David Lyle Jeffrey writes, "This is one clause that has no known origin in Jewish prayer".

Isn't it interesting that the prophet Hosea's words to Israel would be: "**Return, Israel, to the Lord your God. Your sins have been your downfall. Take words with you and return to the Lord. Say to Him: Forgive all our sins...**" and then Jesus would teach His Disciples, and all believers to say, "**Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us**"

Return to the Lord, your God, with words... with confession. Say to God: Forgive us all our sins and received us graciously. Returning to God to re-establish that covenantial relationship requires this repentance. Forgiveness and repentance are two sides of the same shield, you see.

If forgiveness depends on repentance, and most assuredly it does, then so too does repentance depend on forgiveness. When Jesus tells us to pray "Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us" Jesus is NOT, let me repeat, NOT, telling us that God's forgiveness depends on us forgiving others.

Jesus is acknowledging the grounds on which forgiveness is possible. We can forgive others, surely. We can cancel debts held against others, and debts that we hold... we can forgive grievances with each other. We can do that SPECIFICALLY because God does that for us, He shows us HOW to do this by modelling it for us first.

God is the teacher of that forgiveness, He shows us the way to do it, and so we pray for God to forgive us, showing us how forgiveness works - and in turn, we forgive debts and grievances that we hold. If we do not have forgiveness for others, then we have not been brought to that realization of our own sinfulness which God's forgiveness wipes clean.

But let's not miss that striking, and wonderful invitation. God does not say "Return with sacrifices", or "Return with your moral resume polished and perfected". No, He says: **Take your words with you**. Not your money, not your job, not your works - your words. Words of confession. Words of sorrow. Words of longing for reconciliation.

It's a call to honest and heartfelt repentance, not a demand for religious perfection. It's more than a feeling of being sorry - it's a call to name aloud and say it. A penitent heart is an honest reflection of how we feel over grieving our God's heart with our sins.

When Hosea says in Chapter 14 "**Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously**" - that's the heartfelt cry of the prodigal child coming home; it's the whisper of the tax collector in the Temple saying "God be merciful to me, a sinner"; it sets the stage for Jesus in Luke 11 to teach the Lord's prayer... living in a daily rhythm of repentance...

(SLIDE) "**Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us**". There is a continuity here between covenants - Old and New. Hosea tells the people to SPEAK their sin - to confess it openly. Jesus tells us to PRAY it daily - to live in the ongoing reality of grace we have received.

Confession is not the doorway to condemnation, rather, it is the hallway to healing. It is not weakness, it is worship. It is the sound of a heart beating in sync with the Father's own, the sound of relationship being restored day by day, moment by moment.

You see, the story of Hosea and Gomer, scandalous as it was, is your story and mine. We have all played the part of Gomer every time we put our trust in something else to give us our identity, our security, or our hope. And yet, like Hosea for Gomer, God comes for us again. He loves us still. He says, "**Return... bring words... I will receive you graciously**".

(SLIDE) So, may we become a people who know how to say, from the very depths of our soul: Forgive us our sins...
And may we also, by the strength and example of God's love, say to one another: As we forgive those who are indebted to us...
AMEN.