

Persistent faithfulness

Hosea 1:2-10; Luke 11:1-13

The motif of faithfulness is writ large throughout the Bible. Fidelity and trust form an inherent part of the life of faith: between God and humanity; between humanity and the rest of the created order; between humans. Where there is no faithfulness, where there is no trust, the fabric of society frays and unravels.

We see it in marriages and other intimate relationships where love cools and fades; we see it in organisations where people are abused or taken for granted or ignored; we see it between nations and peoples, where land is grabbed, or basic rights denied, or political or theological or economic beliefs confront.

Which makes this passage from Hosea all the more perplexing. The sense of the opening verse is, "*Hosea, go and marry a woman who is a prostitute and raise a family with her.*" It does not matter significantly whether the woman Hosea marries, Gomer, is a cultic prostitute in the Baal tradition, or a 'regular' woman of the night in the ancient kingdom of northern Israel. Or are we meant to take the story as history, or as parable? It remains an extraordinary and unreasonable command. "Why would a loving and caring God command a faithful servant to marry a whore? There is simply no way to add a sugary-sweet glaze to this particular introduction. Hosea was commanded to marry a prostitute, one who sold herself for money or for trade, who was in every sense unfaithful."ⁱ

Where this outrageous Bible story takes us is a difficult place. It takes us to an unswerving look at the state of the relationship individuals, communities, and nations, the very planet itself, have with God. Where God has persistently been faithful to God's people throughout the history and parables of the Old Testament, God's people have failed God, tamed God, been unfaithful to God, and abandoned God time and time again. The parable of this broken marriage, between a faithful and an unfaithful spouse, drives us to think about the faithfulness and unfaithfulness in the relationship we have with God. God Who has been generous and gracious; God Who has

painted His rainbow in the sky to remind Him and us about His unfailing love; God Who has travelled with His people through deserts and to a land of milk and honey, through slavery to freedom, through homelessness to a settled land. This God once more finds Himself jilted by a people promiscuous with their theology and their personal loyalty. This God, Who wants a relationship that is intimate and woven with around with love, is spurned again and again. Hosea contemplates a future without God, and portrays the bleak landscape that would stretch out before the human race if that should ever to be realised.

If you like your image of God as comfortable, gentle, and accommodating, then the God Who confronts us in Hosea is far from that. There is a sharp reminder that we domesticate God at our peril. When our worship presents God on our terms, agreeing with our particular prejudices, whatever they may be, the God Who rattles the cages of our tiny imagination reveals that we are the ones caged, not God.

J B Phillips' 1961 Christian classic, the wonderfully titled, *'Your God is too small'*, challenges us again with the perversely, unfaithful, limited picture we have of God. *"It often appears to those outside the Churches that this (a God Who is too small) is precisely the attitude of Christian people. If they are not strenuously defending an outgrown conception of God, then they are cherishing a hothouse God Who could only exist between the pages of the Bible or inside the four walls of a church."*ⁱⁱ

The God in Hosea is the God of challenge and blistering honesty, Who sweeps away the platitudes and passivity we apportion to our idea of God. *"Although we might like to keep our conversations with God cool, calm and polite...the emotional temperature is turned up; there is heated, passionate, anguished name-calling, shouts and cries, and angry pleading. Can we worship this much of a God?"*ⁱⁱⁱ

This God Who tells Hosea to name the children born out of his broken marriage 'Jezreel', which had come to mean a place of execution and brutality in Israelite history; 'Not Pitied', a reminder that God's characteristic pity had been sullied by the indifference of His people; and 'Not my people', a brutal reversal of the once loving relationship God had with His people, Who He

longed to call His own, and yet who turned from Him again and again. “...*you are not my people and I am not your God.*” (Hosea 1:9)

There will be those who will find this angry, passionate, heated God too much to handle.

Good.

Amongst the many besetting sins in the Church today is the idea that somehow God is there to meet our needs, and to match up to our expectations, and to be turned on and off at our convenience, like some spiritual kitchen tap. Who are we to dictate to God what God can and cannot be like, or say what God can and cannot do? Who are we to delineate the dimensions of the Almighty, to turn to a comfort-blanket Creator when it suits us, when we have issues, or problems, or hurts needing dealt with? In a human relationship if we were to treat another human like that, anyone with a backbone and a beating heart would tell us soon enough where to go! Why do we presume God Almighty would be any different?

God is surprising and subversive; God is angry and gentle; God is cool and fiery. God is more than we can ever imagine. In the face of our persistent unfaithfulness, God is persistently faithful. God is no divine doormat, but the relentless, restless Lover Who, because of us, despite us, will not give up on us.

In Hosea God shouts at His people to get real about Who He is, and what they persist in doing to Him. Hosea paints that awful picture of a derelict world, deserted by an aggrieved Deity. It reminds us of those other powerful images of God's threatened departure: the time when the *shekinah*, the shimmering presence of God's glory departed from the Temple and City of Jerusalem as a symbol of God's removed presence.^{iv} Or worse, the solitary Saviour dying at Calvary, crying out, “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?”^v

We deserve no better. In our generation we have played fast and loose with the affections of God. We treat God in a way that shows God does not matter very much to us. We play the harlot with our economic policies impoverishing further those who already have little. We play the harlot with our exploitation of the gem-like world God shaped for us through our plundering of its resources and our polluting of its atmosphere. We play the harlot with our vaunted

independence and right to self-determination spitting in the face of the harmony and interdependence and mutuality that God has revealed in the shared needs of humanity. We play the harlot with the passing fads of fame and celebrity, with what we want and we must have and do and be, proclaiming by our choices that our time is ours to do with as we choose, with barely a backward glance at the open-hearted, open-handed Giver of all time.

Like the people in Hosea's time, we might not like to hear it. It might appal us, or anger us, disgust us or overwhelm us. Hosea and his harlot wife and his cruelly-named children are not to be found only in pages of a forgotten prophecy, they are writ large in the contemporary world of this C21st. And God is angry, so angry.

And yet...and yet...

Even in God's anguish and hurt and righteous indignation, God cannot ultimately let go of us, even when we deserve to be hurled from His presence.

"Yet", says the prophet. "Yet". And in that little word there is a whole world of regret and mercy, and a sigh deeper than Creation itself, as God gathers Himself and reminds Himself that faithless though His people are, God remains persistently faithful. Our relationship to God is not dependent upon us. Religion, faith, is not a little homework given by God to keep us right with God. Rather Hosea, "...through vivid, striking, even offensive metaphor – reveals the heart of a God Who passionately loves, forgives, seeks, finds, waits, pleads, and saves. Time and again this God forgives. Relentlessly this God does not just sit back waiting for us to come to our senses and return to relationship...This God hounds us until we turn, return, repent, relinquish, and come back...Only a passionate, unseemly God Who is willing to risk scandal could possibly save a bunch of adulterers like us. Thanks be to God."^{vi}

More than we could earn, better than we deserve, our persistently faithful God holds on. That is our hope, and that is our Good News. God's persistent faithfulness saves us, for all time.

ⁱ John E White, Feasting on the Word, Year C Volume 3, p269

ⁱⁱ J B Phillips, Your God is Too Small, p7

ⁱⁱⁱ William H Willimon, Feasting on the Word, Year C Volume 3, p270

^{iv} Ezekiel 11:23

^v Mark 15:34

^{vi} Willimon, *ibid*, p272