

## He Was There All The Time

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on September 24, 1989, the 19th Sunday after Pentecost (at Oxford High School). Scripture: Hosea 11:1-11.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

A few months ago Kay's sister Ann treated us to pictures of her baby's birth. It's a big thing nowadays to take pictures of a baby right after it's born before it's been cleaned up. So I sat there and looked at these pictures which kind of reminded me of open heart surgery. They were disgusting but I sat there and said, "Ah, isn't that nice"... one of the most blatant lies I've ever uttered. <sup>The pictures showed</sup> ~~There was~~ Dave, the father, right there in the delivery room holding this slimey, bloody looking baby with the umbilical chord still connected. Ann and Dave, like most parents, were delirious with joy when Daniel came along and now she's expecting another.

Lewis Smedes, a Christian Reformed minister, throws a different light on parenting. He says, "The loveliest baby on earth is a summons to suffering by the fifteenth year, often long before. When you conceive a child, you covenant to suffer." He goes on to say, "Children can drive us out of our minds with pain. They do not let our dreams for them come true. They can act like subhuman savages, crush our insecure parental egos, break a hopeful heart. One slightly nutty teenager can hang the greatest soul out to dry."

He goes on to write of a particular child... and I think he's probably writing out of some personal experience: You know she loves you, but all you get from her is hate. You try to get close, but all she wants is for you to stay outside. You pray in the night, and you get only silence from on high. You do not even begin to understand. Gradually you find yourself defending yourself to yourself; you *have not* been a bad parent, you *will*

not take the blame. As you grind your teeth in self-defense, you begin to

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Last week Burt Kettinger told us about the birth of his second child,

some fifteen or more years after the birth of his daughter. The child has Down's Syndrome. He was also born with a serious heart defect which required surgery when the baby was only weeks old. After the birth of his son, he shared the news with his Sunday School class in his home church. He shared his disappointment... his sadness... his grief that his boy would never be normal. But he went on to say that, because of the nature of Down's Syndrome, he and his wife know that their son will never reject them. He'll never turn his back on their values. He'll never reject their faith in Christ.

But just this past week I read of another son... a man in Tennessee in his late twenties or early thirties. He comes from one of the most distinguished families in the state. Yet he's in prison. He's convinced that in his alienation from his family he can get back at them by committing crime. He's been on drugs. He's done everything to make his mom and dad disown him. But you know what? They haven't disowned him. They still love him. They still pray for him. But it hurts them (Ben Hayden).

My cousins, Lawrence and Mitzi, live in California. They had three children. The oldest was a high-school senior... straight A student... an excellent musician with the ability to be a concert pianist. One day his mother came home from work and found him dead in his bedroom, a suicide. Lawrence and Mitzi visited us a couple years ago in New York. We sat talking about his boy one night at the kitchen table drinking coffee and Lawrence said, "Ted, it still hurts so much. I remember when he was just a little boy. I changed his diapers. I rocked him to sleep in my arms. I

was there when he took his first steps." And then Mitzi interrupted, "I remember when he'd fall and skin a knee. He'd come crying to me and I'd bandage it and hold him in my arms and kiss him." Kay and I just sat there at the kitchen table in silence, in tears. I couldn't think of anything to say. There was nothing to say.

"It hurts so much!"

In seminary they taught us in our preaching classes to reduce every sermon to one sentence. I don't always do that but I did this week. If I could summarize in one sentence our Scripture lesson it would be this, "It hurts so much." And it's the Lord, speaking through the prophet Hosea, who's saying it. Hosea presents us with one of the most intimate portrayals of God *ever* until the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ. God had called Israel to be God's people, to depend on God with the absolute dependence of an infant on a parent. God had lifted up Israel, held them close, but again and again Israel had wriggled free and chosen to pursue self-destructive behavior.

We hear something of the pain, anguish and helplessness in the heart of the Almighty when he says, "I loved him... but the more I called to him, the more he turned away from me... Yet I was the one who taught Israel to walk. I took my people up in my arms, but they did not acknowledge that I took care of them. I drew them to me with affection and love. I picked them up and held them to my cheek; I bent down to them and fed them. They refused to return to me... war will sweep through their cities... it will destroy my people... They insist on turning away from me... How can I give <sup>you</sup> up, Israel? How can I abandon you?"

"It hurts so much."

I'm so glad this passage is in the Bible because, as a parent, I often get

down on myself. Its incredible... the weight of guilt parents carry around. But the Lord reveals himself in very human terms. He reveals himself as a parent at his wits end because his children haven't turned out the way he'd hoped and planned. I'm so glad the Lord knows what it's like.

Not all of us are parents but all of us are either sons or daughters. Do you remember what it was like to be small enough to be lifted up by someone you love? Remember the feeling of trust that came over you as you recognized the face you were being brought closer to as that of someone you loved? Remember realizing those arms and hands were going to hold you, hug you, keep you safe, not let you fall? Hosea says that's what God is like, lifting us up as someone lifts an infant close against one's cheek. Hosea reminds us of a love that will not let us go no matter how much we deserve to be let go.

I think the proudest thing in my life as a little boy was to know my father and mother loved me. They didn't just tell me so... they showed me. I knew anything I needed, they'd provide. I didn't think they were God... but they were pretty close. That's the kind of confidence the Lord longs for us to have in him. God doesn't simply tell us he loves us he shows us above all in the Lord Jesus Christ. On the cross we see the anguish that's in the very heart of God because of our sin, our rebellion, our refusal to listen to him and to go our own self-destructive ways.

Do you know the tragedy of the Christian Church? That we who are God's children through faith in Christ act as though we're orphans... rather than remembering we have a heavenly father who loves us and promises to provide every need.

How personal is your God? And how sensitive? So sensitive that you can't hurt without God hurting. You can't cry without God crying. You can't

... experience anguish without God experiencing anguish. <sup>you can't separate or ignore him</sup> That's how much you <sup>mean...</sup> mean to the Lord. Wouldn't it be awful to act like God's people who lived in the days of Hosea? Wouldn't it be awful to act like the rest of the world, and to turn away from God... to worship the false gods that so many people in America worship... to fail to acknowledge ~~the~~ the Lord?