

Hope For Messed Up Families

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on July 26, 1998. Scripture lesson: Hosea 1:2-10.

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

Remember the opening words of Tolstoi's, *Anna Karenina*. "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." You may be familiar with Tolstoi's complicated story of a ^{wealthy} 19th century Russian messed up family. The wife discovers that her husband is having an affair with a French girl. She tells her husband, "I refuse to go on living in the same house with you." Turmoil boils through the household. The wife hides in her bedroom all day. Her husband doesn't come home for days. The children run wild. The cook walks off right before dinner. The kitchen maid and the coachman both turn in their resignations. A messed up family.

People we love often hurt us the most. We feel almost no pain when a stranger rebuffs us. We feel a little pain when we argue with a good friend. But we feel stinging hurt when we're jilted by a lover. Parents feel a throbbing ache when we become estranged from our children. Most painful of all is the betrayal of a spouse. "There's a sorrow beyond all telling hid in the heart of love," wrote W.B. Yeats.

Hosea experienced that sorrow, the painful betrayal of his spouse. Biblical scholars differ about how to interpret his story. Some say Hosea simply made up the story of his messed up marriage. It never happened. Others take the story literally. The Lord told Hosea to go down to the red light district and bring home a whore to marry. Still others understand Hosea's story in the light of what so often happens in common experience, we discover too late the real character of the one we love. Country and western singer Alan Jackson sings, "Love's got a hold on me." Love has a way of getting a hold on us. We fall in love. Love blinds us to the faults that passionless eyes see. We ignore warnings of friends and parents. "I've heard she has a drinking problem." "Somebody told me that he beat up his last girl friend." "Didn't he use to smoke pot?" Often the stories aren't true. Too often there's truth in the stories, but the eyes of love are blind. "Love's got a hold on me."

Hosea's love for Gomer blinded his eyes. He ignored the warnings. They married. Marriage is always risky. Anybody who starts a family takes a gamble and most people feel the gamble is worth it. But marriages can get messed up. Country and Western singers would have little to sing about otherwise. They're always singing about achy, breaky hearts. "You're cheatin' heart, will make you weep. You'll cry and cry and try to sleep. But sleep won't come, the whole night through. Your cheatin' heart will tell on you." Some people think Hank Williams wrote that song. The prophet Hosea actually wrote it. Read the story for yourself.

So Hosea married Gomer. Everything went well for a couple years. They had a son. Then troubles started; arguments, tears, angry shouting, the sound of slamming doors and breaking glass. Hosea's wife would stay out late and come home with no explanations. Then she had another child. The girl looked a lot like a guy Gomer met in a bar. Hosea named the girl *Lo-ruhamah* which means *Not Pitied*. Their marriage only got worse. His wife got pregnant a third time. Hosea knew the child wasn't his. He named the boy, *Lo-ammi* which means *Not Mine*. Infidelity. Abandonment. Illegitimate kids. A real messed up family.

Hosea's story reminds us that none of us is exempt from the tragedies of life. We can all make bad mistakes that carry woeful consequences for all of life. And sometimes there are no happy endings. Sometimes couples don't live happily ever after. Hosea's story doesn't have a happy ending. Gomer ended up leaving Hosea. She moved in with an abusive man. She sold herself as a slave. Hosea found her on the auction block. He bought her freedom and brought her home to live with him again. Long before Willie Nelson, Hosea sang, "I can't stop loving you" - like so many others who leave one abusive relationship and jump into another.

Mrs. Doubt for Robin Williams

Sometimes messed up families ... counseling, support, prayer, patience, church family

I don't know which came first: Hosea's unconditional love for his wife or his perception that God reaches out in unconditional love to us sinners. It may well be that out of Hosea's painful and messed up family relationships he came to experience and preach God's unconditional love for us sinners. I find real hope in that discovery. I don't know if Hosea and his family ever got straightened out. I do know that I'm grateful Hosea has shown us the heart of God which we also see in the cross of Jesus Christ. We're like Gomer. We're sinners. Many of

us are religious sinners, but sinners none the less. We're faithless. I'm betting my life on God's unconditional love for you and me.

George Matheson, a minister in the Church of Scotland, lived a hundred years ago. Matheson fell in love with a beautiful woman. They planned to marry but his fiancée broke their engagement when she learned that he was going blind. Matheson became a great preacher but his heart ached for his lost love. In 1882 he wrote a prayer to the God who has come to us in Jesus Christ. Let it be our prayer as well. He said:

O love that wilt not let me go
I rest my weary soul in Thee
I give Thee back the life I owe,
That in Thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.

Let us pray: We trust in you, whom Jesus called Abba, Father. In sovereign love You created the world good and made everyone equally in Your image, male and female, of every race and people, to live as one community. But we rebel against You; we hide from You. Ignoring Your commandments, we violate your image in others and ourselves, accept lies as truth, exploit neighbor and nature, and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care. We deserve your condemnation. Yet You act with justice and mercy to redeem creation. In everlasting love, You chose a covenant people to bless all families of the earth. Hearing our cry, You delivered us from the house of bondage. Loving us still, You make us heirs with Christ of the covenant. Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home, You are faithful still. Glory be to you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.