

**Hosea 1:2-10**  
**Psalm 85**  
**Colossians 2:6-15**  
**Luke 11:1-13**

**Take a wife of whoredom**

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Take for yourself a wife of whoredom - have children of whoredom! Using sexual imagery is surely one way to gain the attention of the audience. That such imagery is found in the Bible may seem surprising but what is even more surprising is Hosea's marriage to a prostitute was commanded by God. The Bible mentions prostitution quite a lot. Like marriage, it represents a powerful metaphor for the state of the relationship with God. And that is what Hosea is concerned with in his prophecy.

Hosea was a prophet in the northern Kingdom of Israel during a time in which it endured a lengthy period of instability. In contrast Judah, the southern Kingdom was stable and posed a threat to Israel, and there were persistent threats from neighbouring Assyria. At the same time Israel's internal politics were disordered; in a thirty year period there had been seven changes of regime. In such a context alliances were made which introduced different influences to the social and religious milieu - bit like trade agreements do today. Another part of the context here is that long ago, as pilgrims in the desert, the people learned they lived by the hand of God alone. Once they became settlers they encountered fertility cults which suggested fruitfulness of the land was due to the god Baal. Hosea's time coincided with a revival of interest in fertility cults in which ritualised sexual activity aimed at ensuring the fertility of the land. As people flirted with non-core cultic practices, the traditions of faith learned in the desert were added to, or even allowed to decay. To play the whore, as Hosea charged, was to promiscuously engage in false worship and dilute or compromise the faith in which Israel was called to live. To take a wife of whoredom meant to marry a woman, probably an Israelite, who had engaged in such cultic activities.

Hosea's marriage and the birth and naming of children from that relationship, together form a prophetic sign he is called to live out. By this was it to be made clear where Israel stood in their covenant with God. Jezreel - meaning God sows, speaks of disaster that is about to break on the house of Israel. Lo-ruhamah - meaning not pitied, stands for God who has no further pity for this people. Lo-ammi - meaning not my people is a translation of "I am not yours". Hosea's prophetic action testifies God is disassociated from the faith and practice of Israel because, in place of the steadfast faithfulness God sought, Israel has forsaken its true identity and offered God a worship of betrayal.

Hosea's prophecy is pretty hard on the ears. What preacher would dare offer such thoughts to the church today unless planning an early retirement. And yet the reading ends on a note of hope and salvation. The people will be numerous; those named "not my people" will again be called "children of the living God", and Judah and Israel will be reunited. Just as Hosea's precarious relationship with his wife of whoredom was maintained by his own steadfastness, so would Israel's relationship be restored by the love of God. Harsh as it the prophet's message is a judgement that seeks, not destruction or revenge, but a return to fidelity. Hosea's message is intended to redeem and restore

Israel's relationship with God whose love will not let them go.

This prophecy is relevant to current discussions in the church. The question of core practices and the extent to which the church should engage with or adapt to the prevailing cultural and political context is a hot topic. Recently it was announced that the Southern Baptists have split from the worldwide Baptist church. Known for their entrenched conservatism and their support of current political leadership, the Southern Baptists accuse other Baptists of liberalism, anti-Americanism, and excessive sympathy towards gays. The Southern Baptists maintain you cannot be Christian and gay, and they are alarmed at a perceived "liberal drift" in the church, personified by the invitation to Desmond Tutu to address the Baptist World Alliance in Durban. The problem was, Tutu was regarded as anti-American because he criticized unrestrained capitalism.

While all this must be incredibly painful for both sides, there is here an interesting case study in cultural adaptation. On one hand most people would see the Gospel as calling us to be open to all people of whatever race or disposition. For most Christians that would be core practice, but the Southern Baptists see being gay friendly as against the faith. On the other hand, while Christians are called to render to Caesar what is due by right, many would understand the Gospel allows us to offer critical reflection on the social and political context. We do this because the merciful justice of God towards us implies a call to work towards a world that reflects the same pattern in its structures and institutions. If in the South this is regarded as anti-American we wonder if certain values have become infused with ideas about God, in a way that mirrors the theological promiscuity of Hosea's Israel.

The church will never be free of debates about what amounts to core practice and what does not, because the context in which faith is lived out will always present new questions for us to face. And the way the faith has been understood and articulated has necessarily been differently nuanced, in the scriptures, and in the tradition.

To what can we appeal as we struggle to live faithfully in our day and time? In relation to the paradigms presented by Hosea, the over riding concept is the love that will not let us go in spite of our betrayals. The change from "not my people" to "children of the living God" is an offer of life in the midst of death. It comes from the love that speaks against us in order to rid us of flirtatious distractions and enable us to recover the undivided heart God seeks, no matter what the context. What seems like a challenge to close us down, is actually an intervention to open us up once more to the source of life.

The text from Colossians deals with similar issues and in a similar way. The church at Colossae was being encouraged to add ritual practices and theological speculation to the Gospel tradition. Do not be held captive to such things, says the author, for in Christ the fullness of deity has dwelt amongst us. In him the powers that held you in sway have been put to death and you are joined to God in him. Do not re-entertain the powers but continue to live in Christ, walk the Christian way and live out the new life that has been won for you. In Romans the real Paul says, in Baptism we share the death of Christ, and our rising with him is conditional upon our daily dying to sin and walking in newness of life. Whereas Paul would have us die each day, Colossians speaks of us as having already risen with Christ and calls us to live each day; to dwell in the gift of new life, the consequence of spiritual circumcision, undistracted by useless pursuits or needless restrictions. Once again, this opens us up to life, rather than shuts us down.

When the pressure is on, and the context is disturbed and unstable, where should we look for help? Hosea would have us look to the love of God which was learned about in the arid and hostile environment of the desert. That is where the people discovered what

really mattered. Colossians actually says a similar thing. It refers to the second Exodus, the Cross of Christ, in which God defeated all the powers against us and raised up Christ who enables us to live a new life. In this God has demonstrated the power of the love that will not let us go; love which, even in our ultimate betrayal of God still gifts life to us and all people. Colossians, and Hosea, ultimately call us to renew our undivided heart of love for God, and live in the life which is God's gift. Whatever does not help us to do this is a distraction, or worse, a promiscuous flirtation that takes us away from life.