

I. Set Up

A. This is week three in our four-week series on God. We are looking at aspects of his character because what we think about God is the most important thing about us – it shapes us more than anything else. Therefore, we want our views of Him to line up with who He actually is.

B. Today the attribute we are focused on is his love.

II. Worship set up: Today’s sermon is on God’s love. In light of that, let me read from John’s first letter, chapter 4, beginning with verse 7

A. Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

III. Introduction

A. Several years before his death, the prominent Swiss theologian, Karl Barth, came to the United States to deliver a series of lectures.

1. This was a big deal. **SLIDE**. A make-the-front-cover-of-*Time* magazine level big deal. There was a day when theologians were prominent people and regularly appeared on the cover of *Time*. That is not the world we live in.<sup>1</sup> We put politicians, athletes, CEOs, celebrities and influencers on the cover of *Time* these days. It has been a long, long time since a theologian was there – at least an orthodox, Christian theologian.

B. Anyway, after one of his talks, a graduate student asked, “Dr. Barth, what is the greatest thought that has ever crossed your mind?”

1. After thinking for several moments Barth replied, “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”<sup>2</sup>

2. This was a stunning answer – a shocking, drop-the-mic-moment, especially if you knew were familiar with Barth. He was brilliant and long winded. He was the author of so many dense, heady philosophical and theological books, that the joke was, no one had read everything Barth wrote, not even Barth.

3. No one was expecting him to quote a child’s Bible song. And yet he said – this is the most profound idea he had heard, the greatest – most wonderful - thought he had ever entertained. Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.

4. I think Barth was spot on.

C. And yet...

1. Christianity is not simply a moral philosophy or a set of ethical guidelines, it is a comprehensive worldview. And this worldview is based on the bold proclamation: “Jesus loves me.” And yet....

2. The claim that we celebrate is not simply that God is infinite, perfect, self-existent, holy, glorious and eternal - for he could be all of these things and still be an abstract force devoid of feelings. He could be the Greek philosopher's unmoved mover. What the Bible declares is that God is a personal being who loves that which he made. And yet...

D. Many people do not feel loved by God. Maybe you.

E. Many people feel overlooked. Many people feel unappreciated. Many people feel forgotten.

1. We know from her diaries – published after her death – that Mother Teresa was disappointed in her relationship with God.

2. I remember a conversation with a friend while in seminary. She said that she believed that God was loving and good and she trusted his promises. But she did not believe God loved her. She believed God loved people and she believed that God loved me, but she did not believe that God loved her.

F. I read recently that most people think that if God was given sodium pentothal, he would admit that he was very disappointed in them.

G. Maybe you feel that way. What are we to do?

H. Well, we are going to have to decide what to trust – our emotions or God's revelation. And that is a topic for another sermon. (We will be taking that up this fall).

I. At the moment, what we are going to do is look at the surprising lengths God has gone to in order to demonstrate his love.

1. And I am using the term “surprising” here because I expect you think I am going to direct you to Christ, and his death. As well I might. For as Paul wrote in Romans 5, God demonstrated his love for us in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

2. There is a sense in which, that display of God's love cannot be topped.

J. But today we are going to focus on a different passage.

IV. There are actually a variety of places we might look for an exploration of God's love:

A. I Cor – 13 – which is read at so many weddings some people think it was written for weddings – comes to mind.

B. I John 4, which was read earlier in the service, comes to mind. We are going to turn to Hosea.

V. But first let me be sure we agree on some terms.

A. In the I John 4 passage, John writes that, “God is Love.” Let me note, this does not mean that “Love is God.” Some have argued that if  $A = B$  then  $B = A$ . But what works in math does not always work in literature. Case in point: we also say, “Love is blind,” but no one would suggest that “blindness is love.” To imply that all love is God would not only be an act of idolatry, it would reduce God down to just one of his attributes.<sup>3</sup>

B. Let me also note that saying “God is love” does not mean that God is sentimental. Today many equate love with butterflies in the stomach, candle-lit dinners and baskets full of puppies. That is, they think of love as a warm emotion. Of course, human love can feel that way, and God’s love has a heart-felt component to it. But his love is never fickle. The Bible declares that God’s love is steadfast. It is always stable, never swayed. The Psalmist declares, “The steadfast love of God endures all the day... I trust in the steadfast love of God forever and ever.”<sup>4</sup>

C. So, what we need is a good definition of love. And here the Greeks help us. Part of our problem is that we only have one word where the Greeks had three. If you listen today, you’ll hear people say that: they *love* coffee, or they *love* the Cubs. Love is used to describe the fierce and all-consuming passion of *lovers*, the devotion parents have for their children and someone’s preference for mushrooms on their pizza. I think we can agree, the term is a bit extended. What, exactly, is love?

D. As I noted, the ancient Greeks avoided some of this confusion by using three different words where we use one.

1. *Philio* was used to describe the loyalty and virtuous love found between friends and family. It is the root in *Philadelphia* (the city of brotherly love).
2. *Storge* is the strong affection parents have for their children.
3. *Eros* describes sensual desire. It is the root of the English term *erotic*.<sup>5</sup>

E. With the benefit of three terms the ancients were able to differentiate between types or aspects of love better than we are.

F. Now some of you are thinking, “What about agape? It’s one of the like four Greek words I know: *agape*, *theos* and *kononia*. Come on Woodruff. There are four Greek words for love.” Well, yes, agape is another Greek word for love, but it was late to the game.

G. During the four hundred years between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the new, Alexander the Great conquered most of the known world. And as a result, everyone had to learn Greek, including the Jews. After this happened, very few Jews learned Hebrew, so they needed to translate their Bible – our Old Testament – from Hebrew into Greek.<sup>6</sup> When they did this, they did not find any of the three Greek words for love to be strong enough to represent God’s love. So, they found a obscure term and infused it with the meaning they wanted to convey. It is this term – *agape* – which implies a self-sacrificing, giving love, that they used almost exclusively when writing about God’s love for us.<sup>7</sup>

VI. But, sometimes words fail. They are not enough. And so, while we have a special term for God’s love – a word that was made up in an effort to describe his fierce commitment to us, his robust, stable, eternity-changing affection for us – that word is not enough. And so, we get stories.

VII. One of those stories develops out of what happens with Abraham and Isaac. Another is captured in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Today, I want to look at the one we find in the book of Hosea, where God has a prophet become a living parable.

- A. The Book of Hosea opens: **The word of the Lord that came to Hosea son of Beeri during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and during the reign of Jeroboam son of Jehoash king of Israel.**
- B. The job of a prophet was to communicate the nature and character of God. And this opens with the standard line for books written by prophet: “And the word of the Lord came to ... and then you get the prophet’s name, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Obadiah, Hosea.”
1. However, what you typically get next is: Go and tell the people XYZ. That is not what Hosea hears.
- C. V2: **When the Lord began to speak through Hosea, the Lord said to him, “Go, marry a promiscuous woman.** The Hebrew term here – zo-nah - has been translated in a variety of ways: adulterer, fornicator, whore, harlot, prostitute – you get the idea.
- D. **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 he married Gomer, daughter of Diblaim, and she conceived and bore him a son.**
1. What Hoses hears is, go and marry a prostitute.
  2. He says, “what?”
  3. And God says, in so many words, “Hosea, you and I are both going to give our lives to people who will reject us. And yet we will keep pursuing them. Keep loving them. Keep reaching out. I need you to experience what I am experiencing so you can tell my story.
  4. I have bound myself to the Jews – with an everlasting covenant, and they are unfaithful. In order for you to understand what I am going through – in order for you to make my point to my people, you must marry a woman who is going to be unfaithful.
- E. We are not told a lot about Gomer. I am sure she has a backstory. What we know is that she seems defenseless against her passion. She is described as a city without walls.
- F. The first three chapters of the book tell the story. We learn that right after they get married they conceive and she gives birth to a son. She then gets pregnant two more times – the second child is a girl and the third is another boy.
1. The names of their second child – “not loved” and the third, “not my people” – along with the fact that the text does not say they are his children, suggests that things started to unravel pretty quickly.<sup>8</sup>
    - a) By the way, if you want to a good Biblical name for your children, I’d suggest you avoid the Book of Hosea: a woman named Gomer, a little girl named “not loved.” A boy called “Not my people.” I think you can do better.
- G. In any event, it’s soon clear that Gomer is sleeping around.
1. We can guess how Hosea found out. Likely, one day he comes home and there is a note on the door. She tells him she’s leaving. She doesn’t like being tied down. She wants her freedom. And, oh by the way, he’s not the father of the last two kids.

2. You can imagine that night. He has to be both a mother and a father to the kids – fix supper and get them cleaned and off to bed. And then he has a neighbor come over and sit with them while he heads out to try to find her.

3. And the neighbor says: it's time to move on. She's no good. You have no idea what has been going on behind your back. And over time he starts to hear whispers:

- a) That's the guy whose wife left him.
- b) The prophet's wife is sleeping around.
- c) Some would say: Serves him right. I mean, he's so busy telling everybody else how to live he couldn't hold his own home together."

4. The way the story reads, you get the idea that on many nights Hosea ends up walking around trying to find her or that he goes to the brothel to talk to her between clients.

H. And then over time her business model starts to unravel.

1. Her price drops. She starts getting passed from one man to the next. Eventually she ends up living with a man who beats her. At which point Hosea pleads with her to come back, but she will not.

2. In 2:8 we read that Hosea gives the man she is living with money to take care of her! He does for a while, never letting her know that the money is from Hosea.<sup>9</sup>

3. Then he tires of her and puts her for up for sale as a sex slave. Where she is stripped naked and bid on by men. And God tells Hosea to go buy her back - which he does – even though it breaks him financially<sup>10</sup> and to treat her well. Hosea 3:1 reads:

**a) The Lord said to me, “Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another man and is an adulteress. Love her as the Lord loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods....”**

I. Playing the fool was Hosea's assignment from God.

VIII. All of this takes place in the first three chapters. There are eleven that follow. In those:

A. Hosea further explores and develops the ideas that Hosea's marriage introduces – mostly using poetry.

B. In Chapter 11:8 we read about God crying. Some scholars call it the most amazing noise in the bible. In that section God says his heart is changed. The word that is used to describe the change is the same word used to describe a city overthrown by his enemy. Clearly, God is torn to pieces.

IX. There are many lessons to learn here.

A. When we read Hosea we need to recognize that all of this is on display – that Hosea is put through this painful anguish, this public scandal – so that we can better understand God's love.

B. We need to realize that we are Gomer and that we are treating God like Gomer treats Hosea;

C. We need to realize that this rips him apart.

D. But the thing I want to focus on today is on God's love. I want you to stare at the way God treats us in response to the way we treat him. I want you to see that God's love is amazing. It's scandalous. It's embarrassing. I want you to see that God acts a bit like a groupie who keeps hanging around, even though he is being ignored and treated poorly.

X. Now, there are several different aspects of God's love we could drill down on:

A. We could note that it is sophisticated.<sup>11</sup>

1. His love for us is shaped by a level of foresight and sophistication that we cannot grasp, just as a child often fails to understand a parent's love. This is Mother's Day, Mothers know the ploys of their children. They know that they will likely hear: "if you loved me you'd let me..." and then they mention something foolish. If you loved me:

- a) You'd let me stay up late;
- b) Or, you'd let me eat cake for breakfast or whatever.

2. Children say these things because they do not understand all of the things their parents understand. They are not as sophisticated as they need to be.

3. It's worth noting that God's love is often too sophisticated for us to understand. So, just like kids say, "you don't love me because if you did you would give me this, or not make me do that" we think the same kind of things.

4. It is worth noting that God's love for us is sophisticated.

B. It is worth noting that God's love for us – like Hosea's love for Gomer - is often in spite of who we are, not because of who we are.

1. God's love is not object-elicited, it is subject-generated. We do not draw it out of him by being cute and adorable. Quite the opposite. God loves us in spite of who we are.

2. I've talked about this a lot, noting that when I am standing here officiating a wedding, one of the things I try to drive home is that they are making a commitment to love

C. A third thing we see about God's love in Hosea is that it is tireless. It seems inexhaustible.

1. In ways the Energizer Bunny can only dream of, God simply keeps on giving. Hosea is modeling God, and he keeps pursuing Gomer.

2. Paul highlights this aspect of God's love in his prayer for the Ephesians. He says:

**a) And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.<sup>12</sup>**

b) We also get this language from Paul in Romans 8, where he even expands on the fact that nothing can separate us from the love of God. Not:

- (1) trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?

(2) Later in the same passage he writes: **For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

3. There are ideas about God's love that are on display in the Bible in general and in Hosea in particular. But there is a sense in which it's Hosea's story – it's his ongoing commitment to care for and pursue Gomer, to keep taking her back – that is the most powerful point.

D. A fourth thing we might note about God's love is that it is complicated.

1. When someone like Gomer is a friend, you have three options:

a) The easy way, which is to support the person but violate the truth. "Well, Gomer, this is how you validate yourself. I want to support you. So, you do you, whatever that looks like."

b) The second way is to walk away. "Well, Gomer. I'm out. I'm done. I can't put up with this anymore. I am moving on. I am not going to keep trying to help. I cannot keep worrying about you."

c) The third way is the hard way. It is by neither quitting or compromising. It is the restoration of the lover as lover.

2. This is what God calls Hosea to model because, this is what God does with us.

a) In Hosea 3 we are told that he, "bought her back." He could have had her as a slave but he takes her back as a wife – this is God foreshadowing what Jesus will do for us.

b) Hosea's struggle – the unthinkable expectation that God has that he would buy Gomer back and restore her – is imagery of what Jesus does for us.

c) And it is not easy. Gomer's struggles are foreshadowing Jesus's struggles. They foreshadow Jesus in the Garden, wrestling and saying, "is there any other way to do this? This is unthinkable. This is too much."

3. Men and women, do not miss this point – we are Gomer, naked, ashamed and guilty. We are the faithless one.

4. And Hosea buying her back and then saying, "I do not want you to be a slave but to be my wife" is foreshadowing Jesus, in John 15, saying: "I do not call you servants but friends."

5. Which is then echoed and underlined by Paul saying, You are not your own. You were bought with a price.

6. Jesus bought us back just like Hosea bought Gomer back.

7. He bought us by laying down his life.

E. Which leaves us with one final point – one final insight about love. It is risky.

1. Perhaps the biggest points we see from this story is that to love is to risk. It is to put our heart out there to be broken.

2. And, of course, Moms know that. More than most – certainly as much as anyone.

3. Everyone gets hurt in love at some point – broken romances, no romances, unrequited love. But Moms love with a unique kind of love and that love is not safe. It makes us vulnerable. To love is to extend our heart in ways that make it easy for someone to hurt us.

4. In the Book of Hosea, God makes it clear that He has made himself vulnerable. He says, “My heart is overthrown. I am coming apart because of you.”

5. The reason God had Hosea marry Gomer is because if he just befriended someone like her, he might have talked to her for a few nights, but then he would say, “I’m done. I kept trying to help. But you are not listening. You are not turning this around.”

6. But if he loved her - if he married her – then her problems were his problems. He can’t walk away. Hosea had to marry Gomer to understand God’s heart.

7. Men and women, consider what the Bible is teaching here. God – who we are told has measured the universe with the breadth of his hand. The planets are specks to him - is broken by the rebellion of the people he loves. He is broken by the cold shoulder they give him. By the cold shoulder WE give him.

8. God sets his love on us – he voluntarily binds his joy with our joy. He will not experience unmixed glory again until we are perfected. He has identified himself with us to this degree.

F. The Letter of Jude is very short, and a bit strident. It’s a punchy letter in which the writer makes it clear that truth is truth. Reality will win. We can try to adjust standards and norms all we want, do “my truth,” but it will not ultimately hold. At the end he has this benediction in which he says,

1. To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.

2. What you need to see is, the joy being discussed there is not our joy but his.

3. He has linked His joy to our well being – and he longs for the day when we are without fault.” Not doing stupid things. Not acting against our own best interest.

G. On a similar theme, we are told by the prophet Zephaniah, that God will sing over us. He will sing a lullaby over us – the greatest song ever.

H. The message here is that God has extended his heart to us – and that extension, that love is risky.

XI. Does that risk always get rewarded?

A. There is a mystery here. Questions not answered. We are not told how Gomer responds.

XII. But here is what we know – God’s love has been proven. In scandalous ways. If God was in the dock and given a lie detector test. He would say that he loves you.



XIII. Worship leader. Worship – which forms us. It is one of the ways in which we are shaped, formed in good ways – worship arises naturally from thinking rightly about God. Today we have heard about his amazing love for us. Let’s sing about that love.

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<sup>1</sup> If pushed, I’d qualify this to say, we do not celebrate historically orthodox theologians. Everyone is a theologian. Some are just very bad at it.

<sup>2</sup> James Montgomery Boice, p. 330.

<sup>3</sup> In his book, *One Holy Passion*, RC Sproul writes,

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 52:1, 8. Note: In this text the Hebrew noun underlying the English words “steadfast love” is “*hesed*”. This important term does not merely mean “love”, but specifically denotes the idea of “committed love, steadfast love or faithful love” – the kind of love that is at the heart of God’s nature.

<sup>5</sup> Though the biblical writers spoke approvingly of sexual love, erotic love was so debased during biblical times that the New Testament writers never used this term in the New Testament.

<sup>6</sup> During the 400 years between the end of the period covered in the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament era, Greek culture spread throughout the Middle East. As a result, many Jews only spoke Greek. To that end the Old Testament – which had been written in Hebrew – was translated into Greek. This happened well before Christ was born. The Greek translation of the Old Testament is frequently referred to as the Septuagint. In writing it is also referenced as LXX.

<sup>7</sup> Agape is the word for *love* most frequently used in the New Testament. It is employed in Matthew 22:39 where Christ instructs us to love (agape) our neighbor as our self, in John 15:12, where he gives us the commandment, “to love (agape) one another as I have loved you” and in 1 John 4:8, “God is love (agape). It is also the word highlighted in I Corinthians 13. However, the word “agape” is not always used in a lofty or spiritual sense. In 2 Timothy 4:10 Paul writes, “For Demas has forsaken me, having loved (*agapo*) this present world....” And it is not fair to draw too much of a distinction between *phileo* and *agape*. In the Old Testament, the main verb for love is “*achav*”, which has a somewhat wider range of uses: from basic human loves and yearnings, such as a father’s love for his son (Genesis 22:2), a strong bond among friends (1 Samuel 10:17), and also for God’s love of his people (Exodus 20:6) and humanity’s love of God (Psalm 5:11).

<sup>8</sup> Also, Hosea 2:4-5 calls these “children of whoredom whose mother has played the whore and acted shamefully.”

<sup>9</sup> See Hosea 2:5-9

<sup>10</sup> A slave sold for 30 shekels. He doesn’t have that much, so he has to give other things as well.

<sup>11</sup> Thanks to Tim Keller – for his sermon on Hosea – for this insight and several others.

<sup>12</sup> Eph. 3:17bff.