

## *Fragmentation No More*

*My people are bent on turning away from me . . .  
(But) how can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?  
My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender.  
I will heal their disloyalty, I will love them freely,  
For my anger has turned from them.  
(Hosea 11:7a, 8; 14:4)*

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the 11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, **August 20, 2017**  
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It's difficult for me to believe over 45 years have passed. My Sunday afternoons were spent a bit differently in 1971 than they are today. Summer Sunday afternoons would often find me at one of many motocross tracks across central Arkansas.

I didn't race. I was then and am still a bit on the terrified side when it comes to motorcycles. My friend Mike, though, was accomplished on the local circuit with his sleek lime green Kawasaki dirt bike. So, on Sundays I watched Mike and his brother Rick risk life and limb on an obstacle course full of twists and turns and jumps and dips.

Reflecting back on those days, I can still hear the sound of engines revving as the bikes bunched up at the starting line, waiting for the signal to start the insanity.



It's a different sort of engine revving I want to tell you about this morning, remembering a particular Sunday afternoon when Mike and his girlfriend brought a friend, a 16 year old girl who caught my eye. She new to our high school in Pine Bluff, I called Mike to the side as he prepped for the race to ask, "*Who is this girl?*" Before long, this 17 year old boy was quite smitten with a young lady named Sherry Oxner. Suddenly, I became goal-oriented. As David Appelbaum writes, "*Eros finds us unexpectedly, without warning, and instantly we are all attention.*"

I was all attention. Perched on that hill overlooking the starting line, sitting awkwardly, uncomfortably, not knowing what to say to this girl who had ignited a fire, it was as if Charlie Daniels was whispering in my ear, "*Fire on THIS Mountain, Run, Boys, Run!*" It was as if the starter had waved the flag right in my face to start the race, not the one on the dirt track below, but rather the race of boy wooing girl. The insanity was about to begin.

If motocross is an obstacle course of jumps and dips and twists and turns, surely the twists and turns of this obstacle course of love were more challenging than those of that Star City dirt track where we met. Still, I was determined to maneuver through all the obstacles, nothing if not

persistent. Well, honestly, a bit bizarre. The clearly defined patterns of behavior by which my family and friends had known me became blurred. I'm sure mom and dad wondered, "*Who are you and what have you done with our son?*" I was experiencing love as Robert Graves described it, "*Love is a universal migraine, blotting out all reason.*"

And so we sped headlong into the midst of love's chaos, four years of an on-again off-again courtship. Through many break-ups and reversals of course we were together, then apart, together, then apart, together . . . well, you get the story. In many ways we kept saying "No," but the fragile seed of an unqualified "Yes" we never, either one of us, allowed to die. I can be thankful now that Sherry kept giving me, in the words of that sublime country theologian Vince Gill, "*One More Last Chance.*" When the flame would lessen to a mere flicker, we nurtured it back, until our final "Yes" was spoken at a Pine Bluff altar 42 years ago.

Having mentioned Charlie Daniels and Vince Gill, I've brought the sermon squarely into the arena of Country Music. Now, I'm not a big Country Music fan, but somehow Country Music seems able to tell stories about relationships. And our text, Hosea, is a book centered on his relationship, on again and off again, with a lady named Gomer.

Before I take you deeper into Hosea and its love story, suppose with me for a moment that the books of the Hebrew Old Testament were radio stations. You classical music lovers with highly refined and sophisticated taste would likely find yourself tuning in often to the *Psalms* -- elegant, graceful, moving symphonies of praise.

If the barely structured improvisation of Jazz is more to your liking, I suggest the book of *Judges*, where the Hebrew people were not yet a nation but only gradually developing structure and cohesion as a grouping of tribal clans. *Judges* describes the moment as "*each man going his own way.*" Sounds like jazz to me! Go with the flow, improvise, ride the creative moment, make it up as you go along. That's the book of *Judges*!

Or, perhaps we have some here drawn to 70's Disco (though I doubt any would admit it!). If you just can't wait to see *Grease* so you can hand-jive with Travolta and Newton-John, if you just loved those turning globes spinning fragmented light in a ceaseless circle of motion, I suggest *Ezekiel*, whose visions of whirling lights may remind you of *Saturday Night Fever*. I can feel as if I'm wearing again one of those 1970's Leisure Suits. Remember them? I preached my very first Easter sermon as a pastor in Clarendon in a lime green leisure suit with glowing white shoes and belt. Sure wish I could find that photo!

If Easy Listening or the love ballads of Soft Rock is your kind of music, I suggest the *Song of Solomon*, where you'll find gentle romantic sounds, a delicate dialogue of love. "*Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine!*"

Speaking of dialogue, if you're a Talk Radio kind of person, I suggest *Job*, who seems to anchor a talk show exploring life's complexities, asking the tough questions: "*Why is this happening to me?*" and "*Why do the righteous suffer?*" Job has many callers to his show. Three friends weigh in, and Job's own wife was an especially belligerent caller, saying, "*Why don't you just curse God and die!*" God himself is the final caller, putting the conversation to rest, saying,

*“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge! Gird up your loins like a man, and I will question you! Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Surely you know. Who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and the heavenly beings shouted for joy?”*

Ah, but if your taste is *Country Music*, beyond question the bible station you’ll tune in to is *Hosea*, a non-stop *Classic Country Connection*. You see, Country Music is adept at telling down-to-earth stories about people and their relationships, not only in their best and happiest moments, but also in their most troubled and tumultuous moments as they maneuver the obstacle course of relationship, suffering reversal after reversal. I’m talking about relationships in all their snarled glory, from moments of sheer romantic ecstasy to low moments of betrayal and hurt.

The love story in Hosea features an odd couple indeed, a Prophet and a Prostitute. Dipping our toes into Hosea 1 this morning you may have felt a Jerry Springer alert had been issued! In Hosea things are a bit crude, so that even reading the scripture from Hosea 1 was an indelicate chore. Hosea’s wife is no polished lady of fine upbringing. She’s a Lady of the Evening! Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim, is to become the *Queen of Hosea’s Doublewide Trailer*.

*“Go marry a prostitute,”* God tells Hosea.

*“Why would I want to do that?”* we might imagine Hosea objecting.

*“Because I like living metaphors!”* we hear God reply. *“What better analogy to demonstrate to Israel that they have played the prostitute, unfaithful in their vows by going after other gods?”* So it is that Hosea learns to croon with Garth Brooks, *“I’ve got friends in low places!”* He weds Gomer, the wanton trollop, and what God has joined together let no one put asunder. But, as one might have predicted, it was a troubled relationship from the start. Gomer continues her promiscuous conduct, leaving Hosea to sing along with Kenny Rogers, *“Gomer (for Kenny it was Ruby), don’t take your love to town.”* That is, in fact, what Hosea says in 3:3, *“I said to Gomer, You must remain as mine. You shall not play the prostitute.”*

Perhaps by now you’re asking how this story even made it to the sacred pages? The answer is that the relationship between Gomer and Hosea represents divine love in microcosm. Yahweh, too, is the outraged partner of a violated covenant, as Israel, like Ruby, *“decks herself with rings and jewelry”* to take her love to town.

The theological question undergirding Hosea is obvious -- will Yahweh forgive the unfaithfulness of Israel, or will he terminate the relationship? The answer doesn’t immediately emerge. As we read this morning from Hosea, there is reversal after reversal. God’s relationship with Israel is filled with jumps and dips and twists and turns, so that God at first says it’s over, that Israel will be Lo-Ruhammah (Not-to-be-pitied) and Lo-Ammi (Not- my-people). But stay tuned, because before the chapter is over God reverses course, saying he will now have pity on Not-to-be-pitied and will call “My people” those who were named Not-my-people. Together. Apart. Together. Apart. In Hosea God keeps giving his people *One More Last Chance*.

Our expectations of divine anger make the tender tones of compassion all the more startling. Just

when God seems ready to abandon an unfaithful people bent on turning away from him, he agonizes, *“How can I give you up? How can I relinquish you? My mind is churning inside me. My emotions are all agitated together.”*

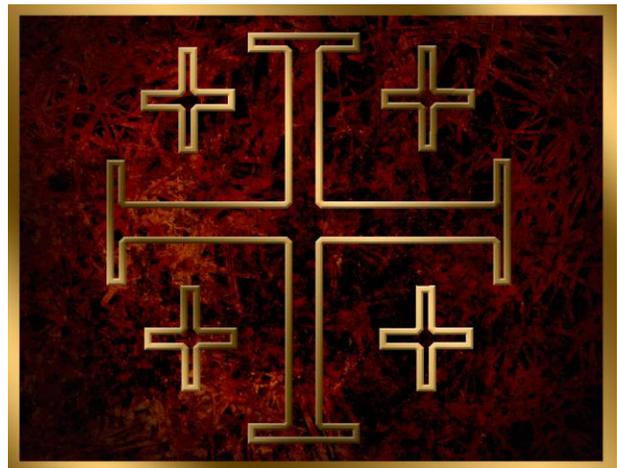
Behold divine love in emotional turmoil. Behold the vulnerability of God, for you see, if love does anything, it renders us vulnerable. Even when God loves, he is vulnerable to brokenness, a divine brokenness we symbolize each time we take the bread of the altar, the Body of Christ, and break it. Behold the love of God that led to his being broken!

God’s love in Hosea is not cast in lofty theological language such as John 3:16. No, but in Hosea God’s love is told in a story with intense emotion. Stephen Bishop wrote the clever country lyrics of a man much in love, but whose relationship was troubled. She left him, and he sang in the pain of his loneliness words I just love, *“I’m so miserable without you, it’s almost like having you here.”* If that’s a schizophrenic song, make no mistake, but it fits because Hosea is a schizophrenic book. God’s frequent mood shifts in Hosea constitute what one theologian called a *“turbulent vacillation of the divine mind.”*

David Appelbaum wrote about our relationships of love, *“How does the heart open to the other? That’s a riddle which has long obsessed humanity. In the blink of an eye Eros’ dart pierces the shield of isolation, and fragmentation is no more.”*

I loved those words so much that I took them for my title, *Fragmentation No More*. In Hosea, at some point God’s fragmented intentions, his “Yes” which repeatedly dissolved into “No,” consolidated into a commitment, the fragile seed of an unqualified “Yes” not allowed to die, until at last (from the New Testament perspective we know the rest of the story) in Christ, all God’s promises become “Yes!” and “Amen!” Our Father’s love, as George Strait sang, *“It’s a love without end, Amen.”*

The heart of the Good News is that in Christ fragmentation of the divine mind such as we’ve seen in Hosea is no more. God’s “Yes,” extends to us as *“Christ died for us while we were yet sinners.”* In the cross a fragmented world is drawn into the orbit of his brokenness, of his vulnerability, of his suffering. I love the Jerusalem Cross, a central cross with four smaller crosses set within the four quadrants of the larger cross. For me, it’s a reminder that the cosmos – north, south, east, and west -- is drawn into the orbit of his Redemptive Love. The Jerusalem Cross places Christ at the center, a vortex drawing the world to himself, as Paul wrote, *“Christ is before all things, and in him all things hold together . . . through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven . . . through the blood of his cross.”*



I think I shall never forget the first time I saw a whirling dervish. It was May of 2001 and Sherry and I had led our pilgrim group on a dinner cruise on the Nile River in Cairo. We had finished a wonderful meal with entertainment and I was about to leave the dining room to go up to the deck to admire the lights of Cairo when the dervish whirled into the room, his brightly colored robe unfurling to fill the dance floor, a floating circle of ceaseless motion. His movements energized the entire room, gathering us in as we were drawn into the whirling vortex of the dervish. The show lasted perhaps thirty minutes, and he never stopped spinning! At one point, mesmerized, I leaned forward with elbow on the table, resting my chin on my hand. The dervish, never stopping his rotations, observed my posture and on each of his next several revolutions, just as his eyes, sweeping across the room, fixed on mine, he imitated my posture. Yet more amazing is that simultaneously he was mimicking others in the four quadrants of the dining hall.

I was so taken by the dervish that I came home to research, discovering that what I had seen as entertainment was really not what the dervish is all about. Rather, the dance of the dervish was begun by Rumi, a 1000 year old dance not at all meant to be entertainment in bright colors, but rather to be prayer and worship adorned in white. It was liturgical dance, meant to be an imitation of the cosmos, the spiraling motion of the dervish imitating the motion of life, from the smallest molecular particles to the winding double helix of our DNA, and to the planets in their revolutions around the sun, even to the galaxies. Eight years later, in 2009, Sherry and I had an opportunity at an ancient caravan-serai in Turkey to see a troupe of whirling dervishes in actual worship, rather than entertaining. This image is a photo of a decorative plate featuring the dervish dance which Sherry and I purchased while on that 2009 journey through Cappadocia in Turkey.



Tomorrow's eclipse is but a single moment in the heavenly dance of stars and planets, and the dervish is meant to be a living symbol of that spiral of life. One last thing to note is that the dervish spins with the palm of his right hand up and the palm of his left hand down, symbolizing that each person is to be a conduit of the divine love to the world – receiving from God, and giving to the world, until there is *Fragmentation No More*, and God's kingdom reigns on earth as in heaven.

Our world is fragmented and broken. Nothing could be clearer. May we, in our brokenness, discover peace and reconciliation in the Cross of Jesus, the living vortex of God's redemptive love and grace. Amen.