

This is the very first in a series of twelve sermons from the Minor Prophets. I may sound cute and clever to say that there are Major Messages in the Minor Prophets, but it's true. And by the way, they're called Minor Prophets not because they are less important but because of their size—shorter.

Since this is our one shot at Hosea's message, let me say that in the earlier chapters Hosea gives an extended metaphor of Yahweh's marriage with the people of Israel which is paralleled by Hosea's real life marriage to a woman who turns out to be *unfaithful* to him. In chapter 11 Hosea again speaks in the first person for the Lord about Israel as a people. The “infancy” of this people was when they were slaves in Egypt and the Lord rescued them in the Exodus, as a parent rescues a child. However, they have proven *unfaithful*, sacrificing to foreign gods and idols.

The people turned from the Lord, even though he was the one who dealt tenderly with them. As a consequence (whether the people realize it or not) their enemy Assyria will destroy the kingdom and rule them no matter their desperation. Yet at the same time the Lord's love will not allow him to destroy them as were evil people long ago. The reason the Lord cannot and will not totally destroy them is that the Lord is holy (meaning he is different than Israel). In contrast to his people, the main characteristic of Yahweh is his *faithfulness*, or to use the Hebrew word, his *hesed*, translated “steadfast love.”

Hosea portrays Yahweh as having thoughts and feelings like a human. He does that so we can latch onto or compare the Lord with what we already know and understand. That's how theology works. We always must talk about God in human terms because that is all we know. Yet depicting God with human thoughts and emotions creates something of a problem. If we hear of God acting in human ways, maybe this God is like us in other ways, we think.

If God is comparable to us in loving, is God also comparable to us in fearing, lying, holding grudges, and hating? Our love isn't steadfast. Perhaps God's love is sporadic too. If the Bible speaks of God in human terms we can wonder about God's motives and ask about how it is that God relates to us. After all, we know it's hard to have confidence in people, especially those who are so certain that they know what's best for us. We're suspicious of those kinds of people. So we can wonder about this God who is portrayed as so faithful and loving. And since Hosea portrays God with human emotions, we'll go ahead and refer to this God as a human. We'll even call God “he.” God is neither male nor female; but since it is God's idea to be similar to humans, we'll call God “he.”

Hosea says the Lord keeps coming around expressing interest in us. But would we trust a neighbor who is always poking his nose into our business? Does God continually approach us out of some kind of psychological need, like a superhero that has flaws that filter through their personalities? Does God bring order to our world to make himself feel secure?

We know people who have become successful because they pushed themselves so hard out of a sense of inferiority. They live for constant affirmation of their achievements. Is God also so fragile that he lives to be revered and obeyed? Is there something lacking in God's personality that he compensates for his deficiency at our expense? Does he summon all of existence, saying, “Gather around and behold what I've made on earth: a creation in my own image. See all those little me's down there. Ain't I great?”

Does God invite us into life merely as an audience, because why sing if you have no one to perform for? Why practice the piano if no one will listen to the concert? Why practice football if no one comes to the games? And why be good if no one else knows? Does God scatter us over the earth so he can look down and gloat over all that belongs to him? Or is God merely lonely and asks if we can come out and play? Or slightly more admirable, does God love to sing and cannot enjoy the melody if no one sings harmony with him?

If God is like humans, maybe God only needs us as a comedian needs a straight man: to have someone to compare himself to. To be able to say, “I’ve got more than you do. I’m older than you, stronger than you, smarter than you,” so that our discordant sounds make his music echo more majestically, our imperfections make his superiority shine the more noticeably, our poverty makes him look all the wealthier?

So we ask: Are we a passing fad to God? Is God initially friendly to everyone, but only casually so, and then when we most need a friend, this heavenly God abandons us? Since God is so much more than we are, are we alive so God can gather all our foibles and failures into his late-night monologue for the angels?

Because Hosea pictures us in his book like a young child and God like a parent, is God like adults who gush over infants but grow tired of parenting when the kids grow older? How can we get past assuming that God is just a little bit more than a human in every capacity? How do we place our faith in such a One? Hosea tells us that while we ponder about God, God ponders about us. Since God is so different from us, he wonders how to get through to us, to reach us, to touch us. If we’re loaded down with questions about God, God questions himself. He worries about how to prove his concern for us.

I remember a mother who anguished about her child in the first grade, seeing her out of place or ignored on the playground, and how she wished she could become small, squeeze into the shape of a first-grader, and go to the playground to befriend her own child, encourage and support her child, and teach the child how to get along with others. Can you relate to that parent’s love? That’s what it’s like for God. As humans we can only imagine entering into the child’s world as a child, even though we can’t do it.

But when you’re God, neither selfishness nor egotism presses God to be involved with us. It’s not that God started the world and keeps it working right so his reputation won’t be ruined. God, with all the bragging rights of the universe, is driven to be among us through the most genuine and transparently honest thing we can imagine—his steadfast love. If we wonder a little how to help our children, God does so infinitely more.

After Hosea portrays God’s feeling toward us as a human, he quotes Yahweh: “*For I am God and not human—the Holy One among you.*” Saying God is holy means that God is totally above any standard of goodness we have set. God is off the scale of goodness and love. Yes, for us to understand God, God must be compared to how we live and what we already know and experience. But then you have to multiply—not add, but multiply—the best of human life by the dimensions of the universe to reach the quantity of God’s goodness. That’s what God means when he says: “*For I am God and not human.*”

Yet God, with every being in the universe to praise him, became smaller than a first-grader, smaller than a kindergartner, even to an infant, to demonstrate that he isn’t here to get something from us but to *give us*

something to us. God isn't merely a human, but God is here in our midst in extraordinary ways sharing not only our joys but also our sufferings, not taking something from us but adding to everything that we are and do. God is here in our midst, helping us again and again to respond to divine love and to each other's needs.

God is among the human race, among this congregation, and in the midst of each of our lives. Try as we might, we can't shake loose from this God. Every corner we round there's God again, loving us. No matter what we think, say, do, or become, somehow God meets us and calls us home to him again.

Because this is how God has always related to us, it isn't surprising to find God in a pile of straw in Bethlehem, or hanging by nails at a public execution, or walking in a garden early one morning offering comfort to a bunch of women who thought he was dead.

God just can't seem to give up on us because *FAITHFULNESS* is what God is about, whether in the 8th century BC or in the 21st century AD. And, remember my friends, God's *faithfulness* is what makes the good news so very good. Amen.