

“Overwhelmed by the Need”
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St. Paul’s UCC Church
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Hosea 11:1-9

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols. Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed like them. They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me. The sword rages in their cities, it consumes their oracle-priests, and devours because of their schemes. My people are bent on turning away from me. To the Most High they call, but he does not raise them up at all.

How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.

It’s hard being a parent. (Can I get an “Amen”?!). It’s hard being a parent. It’s about the greatest joy I can think of, but it’s hard, too.

My daughter Ellie is 9 now, and my son Wil is 5 ½. (The “½” is very important!). Ellie is beginning to act more and more like the preteen she is (“Oh my gosh, Mom, you are SO un-cool!”), but she also is so sensitive, so tender, she can become upset so easily. And Wil, my goodness, what a beautiful, beloved, *stubborn* child! But also super sensitive, with so many needs.

This is true of both my kids: the mood swings, the opinions, the crying, the meanness, the obsessions, the *neediness*. Sometimes, I find myself losing patience. Sometimes, I find myself feeling overwhelmed by the need.

Overwhelmed by the need. This is what happens when we get overburdened by someone else’s moods, or pain, or suffering. Sometimes, it gets so bad that we learn to harden our hearts.

When I was living in New York City, I started out as such a bleeding heart. I was going to seminary the following year, I knew I had a calling to act Christ-like in the world, and I genuinely had a lot of compassion for hurting people. At the beginning of my year

in the city, I talked to all the homeless people I ran into. Someone would come up to me, and I would take the time to speak with them, to sit with them, to listen to their stories. But by the end of the year, I was growing tired. My listening, my compassion, didn't seem to change anything. There were just as many homeless people as there had always been. Their needs were just as pressing. So I didn't talk to them as much. Sometimes, I ignored them entirely. I had somewhere to be. And I was so tired. Overwhelmed by the suffering, by the needs, of the world, I hardened my heart.

I bet you know what I'm talking about. Maybe you look around and see all the refugees coming out of Latin America, the Middle East, other places too. You feel overwhelmed by the need. Maybe you harden your heart, even just a little. Or maybe you look around our own country. You see children and adults killed by guns every day. You see hungry children. Homeless women and children. It's so much suffering. You don't know what to do. You are overwhelmed by the need. Maybe you harden your heart, just a little more.

This can happen on a smaller scale, too. This can happen, and it happens all the time, in our own homes. So many of us have alcoholism, addiction, abuse, mental illness in our families. We love the people in our families, but they are so broken. We've done everything we can, but Dad will never stop drinking. We've moved heaven and earth, but our child just won't get help. We are at the end of our ropes. We can't do anymore. Overwhelmed by the need, we throw up our hands. And maybe we harden our hearts, just a little more.

And all this makes me wonder: does God ever feel anything like this? Does God ever throw in the towel, simply overwhelmed by the need? Is God's heart ever hardened? That's the big question in Hosea 11, our text for today.

The prophet Hosea lived during the mid-eighth century, BCE, in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The book of Hosea is set in the time period right before the powerful Assyrian empire conquers Israel. While Hosea prophesies, the rest of Israel is trembling for its life as it tries to keep the Assyrian army at bay. In the frenzy of attempting to keep the threat of Assyria to a minimum, the people of God do what they have to do. This includes paying the Assyrian army off, thereby draining Israel's cities of many of its resources. But Israel doesn't stop there. In another attempt to keep the peace, the people of God even begin worshipping the Assyrian god Baal. They believe that if they worship Baal – even if they still worship the God of Israel most of the time, and Baal on the side – that they might be able to keep their land fertile and the blessings flowing.

It is out of this context that Hosea begins to prophesy, calling the people back to their own God. At the beginning of the book of Hosea, in chapters 1 and 2 especially, the prophet uses the analogy of God being married to an unfaithful woman. God, says Hosea, is like a husband who loves his unfaithful wife; and the people of God are like

the wife, refusing and rejecting the husband's love. This hurts God. This breaks God's heart. And it makes God angry.

But God does not stay angry. In today's reading, the metaphor shifts; and God becomes a mother, and Israel is the wayward child: "Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed like them." (Hos. 11:3-4).

It's beautiful imagery. But none of it seems to matter. No matter what metaphor Hosea employs – whether God is an angry, hurting husband, or a tender, hurting mother – nothing is working. No matter what God does, Israel just keeps turning away. And God is so broken. "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?... My heart recoils within me." (Hos 11:2).

God has done everything. God has punished; God has pleaded; God has cajoled; God has withheld. God has tried everything imaginable to bring Israel back.

And yet, and yet, God does not succumb. God has every reason, every right to do it; but God does not throw in the towel. God does not give up. God's heart is not hardened.

At the end of our passage from Hosea, God says, "...for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst." (Hos. 11:9b). In other words, I am not like you, God says. I am God. You are not. Here's the difference between us and God: we get overwhelmed by the need. God never does.

And this is good news – very good news indeed. God is not like us humans. God never gets tired of loving me and you and everyone we know and everyone in this world. So when we are tired and at the end of our rope, we can just...give it to God. We can take the people who make us so sad, or angry, and turn them over to God. We can take the problems that overwhelm us to that One who is never overwhelmed.

We can rest in the knowledge that there is a God and it is not you. And it's not me. Thank God.

And there's a paradox here. I have found that when I can give up the suffering in this world, when I can give up all the pain to God, that something really strange starts to happen. When I surrender, I find that I can actually love... more. Because I know that I'm not God – because I know I'm not responsible – I have a revived sense of energy, of love, of compassion. When I can give up my fatigue, my feeling of completely being overwhelmed, to God, God will renew me.

I may get tired of loving from time to time, but God never does. I may feel overwhelmed by the need, but God will not.

Thanks be to God.