



# FROM THE PULPIT

## *North Shore Congregational Church*

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### *“God is Unjust”*

**Rev. Dr. Martin W. Hall – Preaching**

*Hosea 1: 2-9*

*May 1, 2016*

In the past few weeks, we’ve been talking to our girls about our state Congregational Camp – which will be a first-time experience for them this year. And, throughout that dialog, I’ve been reminded of many of my own experiences of directing a similar camp in MI for a number of years. One of the standout experiences in my time of doing that, however, always drew me back to this passage from Hosea. So, before I tell you more of that experience, we need to get a little better understand of what Hosea is saying here. So, bear with me as I go through some of this.

What we have in this morning’s reading, spoken through the prophet Hosea, is, in many ways, a description of God’s metaphorical family. This text was written during the time of the divided kingdoms between Israel and Judah. Hosea was a prophet in Israel, the northern kingdom, and was writing in a time in which Israel had joined forces with Syria (to their east) against the stronger and more financially viable southern kingdom of Judah. In the process, however, that union between Israel and Syria led to a point at which religious pluralism had grown and many of the people of Israel had come to worship the god of Baal (a storm god). Furthermore, what was once a series of divinely appointed kingships (such as Saul, and Solomon, and David), had given way to recurring uprisings and assassinations as people vied for control of that northern kingdom of Israel. That is the circumstance to which Hosea is responding in this prophesy.

Now, we know that this text is somewhat harsh – somewhat graphic. But, what Hosea is really doing in this text is comparing the people of Israel, the people of God who have succumbed to that litany of shortcomings, to that of a promiscuous, prostitute, wife. Each time this metaphorical wife becomes pregnant, and gives birth to a new child, a name is given to the child. What we don’t realize on the surface, however, is that these names are chosen with specific meanings that explain the problematic status of the people of Israel in the eyes of God.

- The first name, Jezreel, is granted because the region of Jezreel, a set of plains in the center of Israel, was a site that had become known as the place of shedding tremendous blood in the many battles for the throne of the northern kingdom.
- The second name, the daughter, is named Lo-ruhamah. This name literally translates as, ‘not pitied.’ God goes on, ‘I will not have pity on the house of Israel or forgive them.’ It

is almost as if God is smirking as he rubs it in and says, ‘not only will I not have pity on you, but I will have pity on Judah, your enemy.’

- Finally, the youngest son is born, and he is named Lo-ammi. Once again we have the prefix ‘Lo,’ which means ‘not,’ and this time it is followed by ‘ammi,’ which means, ‘my people.’ Our third name is directly translated to mean, ‘not my people.’

It is here that we are brought full circle, and the realities of the people of Israel are brought back to that very fundamental definition of what it means to be in covenant with God. That recurring theme of covenant, defined by so many words throughout the Bible, consistently contained that basic formula of, ‘I will be your God, and you will be my people.’ It is here, in Hosea, that this covenant is broken. God exclaims, through Hosea and the metaphor of his family, ‘you have ceased to be my people, so I am no longer your God.’ This is the nature of the contingent covenant. If one side fails to meet the agreement, the other will no longer be bound to do the same. In the face of the fact that the people of Israel had ceased to behave as God’s people, Hosea proclaims that God was no longer bound by the promises of that covenant and was free to exclaim, at will, ‘I am not your God.’

Now, back to my experience at camp. There was one year in which the theme of the camp was centered around Holy Week, and one of our major programs was the re-enactment of some of what took place throughout that week. The opening scene, on one particular evening, was that of Jesus sitting with his disciples in the upper room and serving them what we now call the Last Supper. The next scene carried us through the prayer in the garden, the betrayal, and the arrest of Jesus. After his arrest, then, we transitioned to the scene of Jesus on trial before Pilate. And, this is the one that got to many of us.

Due to the fact that we were dealing with children, there was an audience participation factor in this presentation. In addition to a repeated song sung while each scene transitioned, various words and phrases were repeated by the crowd, in an almost chant-like fashion, upon the leadership of the narrator. To this point in the presentation we had chanted words and phrases such as, “the New Covenant,” “pray,” and, “sacrifice.” However, at the moment of the trial, as Pilate asked the audience what should be done with Jesus the narrator led us through the chant recorded in the Gospels in that moment, “Crucify him, Crucify him, Crucify him...”

In that moment, as we, ourselves, chanted that phrase, we were stirred by the manner in which our decisions, our actions, and our lives have recurrently included that inherent chant, “Crucify him.” We were forced to ask ourselves how many times, not in words but in thought and deed, we had joined the crowd in calling for his sacrifice. With this experience in my heart, however, I sat down that night to explore some of my own personal devotional reading, and part of it was this passage from Hosea – and I was stricken.

My mind immediately turned to that question I had asked again and again in what had become an incredibly powerful night of reflection at camp. It was simply, in this passage from Hosea, different words to raise the same question. In the words of that evening experience, how many times had my very life been calling for the crucifixion of Jesus? In Hosea’s words, how many times had I ceased to be the person of God that I was expected to be? How many times had I given God every right to cease being my God?

That's the question that hit me. How many times had I given God every right to cease being my God? I try to live the best I can, I try to devote my life to God's calling, but I'm human, I fail. All too often, I fail. How many times had I given God every right to cease being my God? The truth was that it was many! But, then I found myself asking how many times had God actually ceased being my God? Never! Not one!

I continued on in the reading from Hosea and read just the next two verses beyond what I read this morning. Hosea continues, "Yet the number of the people of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which can be neither measured nor numbered; and in the place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' is shall be said to them, 'Children of the living God.' The people of Israel shall be gathered together, and they shall appoint for themselves one head; and they shall take possession of the land, for great shall be the day of Jezreel."

We often speak of God as being a just God, a God of justice. I guess what I'm trying to say in all of this, however, is that I think Scripture makes it abundantly clear that God is anything but a 'just' God. Justice, at least in my understanding, is the dispensing of that which is measured, appropriate and deserved. When it comes to God, however, I have never received what I deserve and have always been blessed with a thousand times the grace and mercy that I merit. I think, when we really think about it, the fundamental point of our faith is that God is is everything but just. No. God is grace, God is mercy, and God is love.

However we each may view 'getting what we deserve,' however it is that you view a separation from God – whether you look at that as a reality for life today, or a possibility for life hereafter – that's something to which I do not mean to make any comment in this message. What I do want us to consider, however, is how often, for our sake, and to our extraordinary benefit, God has truly been unjust.

Now, I know that we are all at least cognitively aware of the truth that we do not deserve the grace of God. I do not mean to put forth this message as some revelatory event for everyone in earshot. However, it is a question worth considering. How many times have you given God every right to cease being your God? How many times has God actually ceased being your God? Perhaps, if we can get a grasp on the truth revealed in those two questions, perhaps, if we can understand the sheer unjust nature of God, perhaps then we could have a real sense of the depth and power of the grace, the mercy, and the love that stand at the very core of our faith. And, perhaps then, and I would suggest maybe only then, might we manage to pursue a way of living that is even close to pointing in the direction of being worthy of that undeserved and unjust grace and mercy we have already received.