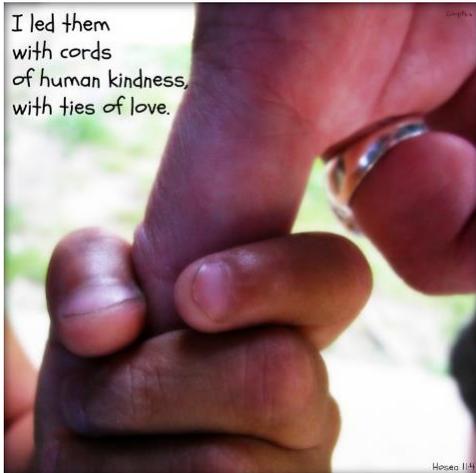


Highfield Rd Uniting Church

Our loving heavenly parent

Hosea 11:1 - 11



Who is God? What attributes do you put with God in your understanding of the divine?

Some people have tried to read the Bible cover to cover. They begin with Genesis and then lose heart in all the laws of Leviticus and the dreadful punishments, or the blood thirsty God demanding genocide as the people of Israel take possession of the land. The image of God that they see is all judgement and anger and a divine being who uses violence to bring about obedience. A far better way to read the Bible is to start with one of the Gospels and become familiar with the God of Jesus and take that image of God into your reading of Genesis and

Leviticus and Joshua. Or begin your reading of Hebrew Scripture with the prophets, like we heard today from Hosea. Here, especially in the text we heard this morning, you find a totally different image of God from the blood thirsty, vengeful, demanding divine figure of the Biblical history books. Hosea presents us with the loving parent, guiding and caring. God the compassionate and protective leader. The people of Israel had given up on God, but God will not give up on them.

Last week, we looked at the lessons on prayer from Luke where Jesus gave the bold invitation to call God 'Father', picturing a relationship that looks like child and parent. And here we have, some 700 years earlier, the words of God in the pen of the prophet Hosea saying much the same thing but in even more loving and caring language. Like sitting with the people and going through the family photo album, Hosea is reminding them of the wonderful tender moments of their life with God. "Look, here is God lifting the child Judah for a cuddle. And look, here is God teaching Israel how to walk. And look, here is our walk through the wilderness with God leading us with the cloud and feeding us with manna." This wonderful tender language has no gender to it, because it is written as God's words, but certainly the account raises in us images of mothering as well as fathering. The sort of duality of language and image that we see when Jesus was yearning to be like a hen gathering her chicks. Just as scripture says that we are made in the image of God - male and female - so we can image God as our loving parent - Mother and Father. And indeed, because we use Father so often in our worship we can fall into the image of 'man in the sky' and get a little edgy when people use female images or pronouns for God, I think we need to hear these mothering images more and more. A rounder and fuller image of the love of God that lifts us beyond remote, stern, father figure to ideas of nurture and care and compassion of a loving parent. Maybe balancing the images and the pronouns would be a better way of building an image of God than tortuous grammar to avoid male pronouns.

*So, God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God, she created them,
male and female, he created them,
and she blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply".*

Stepping back and looking at the whole sweep of divine history, the totality of the story of God and humankind, we can see something even grander than the parable of the wayward younger son who runs off with the inheritance. God is more than the father who waits for the son to come to his senses, God is the loving parent who goes out seeking the wayward children and calling them home. In guidance, in law, in nationhood, in revelation and prophecy, God called again and again for the people to live with him. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus is the capstone to that long history of God seeking us and calling us into relationship; the loving parent rounding up her children. Beyond all the stories of judgement or punishment is the heart of the grand story - God loves us and cares for us and for all humankind. Hence our calling is to more than just ourselves; mirroring God's love means enacting justice, compassion, and care. We love because God first loved us, we reach out in care because God first reached out to the world.

In this time and culture of families under tension over cultural issues, generational issues, sexuality and gender issues, we need to hear the words of our loving heavenly parent:

*How can I give you up?
my heart recoils within me;
my compassion grows warm and tender.*

Remember that these words from God, the caring parent were written in the time of the worst of the peoples' rebellion against God. Read the rest of the book of Hosea, or the book of Amos. In the time of the divided kingdom, Judah and Israel, the people didn't just abandon the worship of God, they abandoned justice and abandoned care for the poor and needy, and abandoned love of neighbour for love of self alone. Indeed, the middle of the passage we heard this morning is all about punishment and judgement, just like so many other passages in the books of prophets from the same time. The only way that the people of Israel understood their downfall and exile was as punishment from God for all their failures to uphold the covenant. But then, as if God digs deeper into the heart of God's nature, we have these wonderful words of faithful love:

*How can I give you up?
I am God and no mortal,
the Holy One in your midst,
and I will not come in wrath.*

To reverse the comparison that Jesus offered when talking about prayer; if God, the Holy heavenly parent, will not give up on us, even when we rebel, how can we as parents give up on our children? If God, the Holy heavenly parent, will not give up on the world, how can we turn our back on people in need and only look to the survival of the church?

Who is God and what is your image of God? Holy, awe inspiring divine being who must be obeyed and who exacts punishment for disobedience? Or loving heavenly Creator and Parent who yearns for our attention and whom we obey and follow out of love? Who is God and what is your image of God? Personal protector and source of salvation for those who are good? Or the compassionate One who calls all to life and wholeness? It isn't just rationalisation, or wishful thinking; God is love. And God calls us to share that love with the world, and work for that love to be the way that we all relate to each other.

God calls for us to come,
he roars like a lion to call us to follow
she cries out like a shopkeeper to get our attention

Come to find life, come to find love,
come to be joined to the great community of faith
to share God's love and bring in God's ways.