

Hosea 11:1-11
How Can I Give You Up?
Hope Christian Reformed Church
Erin Marshalek
August 8, 2010

Even if a parent does everything right, sometimes a child still runs away.
Sometimes there are explanations, and sometimes there aren't.

For some parents:

You carry this human being in your body from the time that he's just two cells,
 then the size of a peanut,
 then the size of a plum...
And you feel him kick inside you,
 and even though he's laying on your bladder,
 and he wakes you up in the middle of the night,
Even before you've ever seen his face, you love him.

For some parents:

You watch this woman who you love so much carry your baby inside her body.
 And you love to lay your hands or your head against her body,
 to feel this beautiful life moving around inside her,
 and he gets excited when he recognizes your voice.
And even before you've ever seen him,
 you're filled with so much love that the only way you can express it is to come right up and kiss
 his mama's belly.

For some parents:

You've been hoping for this child, and praying for this child,
 and as soon as you step off the airplane or walk into the hospital room,
 the instant you lay eyes on him,
 even if he looks nothing like you,
 you know that he is yours.

You love to look at him, and hold him.
You love to rub your cheek against his.
You take pictures like crazy.
You treasure every facial expression and every bubble of spittle.
You don't get tired of telling stories about what he's learning.
You teach him to walk by letting him wrap his tiny hands around your fingers.

You'd do anything for him. He's your baby.

But something isn't right, and it isn't just growing up and learning to assert themselves.
As soon as he learns to walk, he's running away from you.
He learns to talk, and he starts saying things like, "I hate you."
When you reach out to hug him, he hits you.
When you ask what's wrong, he doesn't say a thing.

He only says things like, “You never do anything for me.”

You give him space, and he says you don't care.

You reach out, and he pushes away.

You tell him you love him, and he runs to an abusive girl, and the relationship beats down his spirit.

Every time you turn to him, he turns away.

And it doesn't make any sense.

You do everything right – or at least you do the best you can:

and he insists on running away.

If you've lived this, it's too much. It's enough to break your heart.

And if you have an idea of what that heartache is like, that gives us an idea of the heartache of God. In fact, the LORD compares Israel to a runaway child; and he compares himself to a brokenhearted parent:

He adopted Israel when he was tiny: just a baby nation.

Early in their history, they were slaves in Egypt. But God adopted Israel, and rescued him from Egypt.

Way back in the desert, God made a covenant promise with them: that he would forever be their God, and that they would be his special, beloved people. *They* would carry on the family name.

God held them by the hand when they were taking their first wobbly steps.

And every time they fell down – every time they made a bad decision and enemy nations threatened them – the LORD intervened and rescued them. He healed them.

Far from leading Israel with an iron hand, God wrapped Israel with his love, and he led them with gentleness and kindness.

He was tender, like a mommy lifting her baby to her cheeks.

Like a daddy who bends down to feed his little one.

But inexplicably, Israel didn't notice, didn't care. Israel ran away and said, “I'll do what I want.”

They chased after money, and the rich beat down the poor.

They were violent to one another.

They became cheaters and liars.

They ran from the God who carried them in his arms...and he ran to Baal, an idol you could carry in your hands. A god who's temperamental and quick to fly off the handle, so you'd better keep him happy.

He ran from the God who rescued him from Egypt...and he turned and went back to Egypt!

And at this stage in history, Assyria is the dominant nation around. And Assyria ruled Israel with an iron hand, and with whips. Assyria punished with humiliation, and with the sword.

This is more than Israel can bear. So, do you know who they call to for help?

Baal!

But Baal doesn't raise them up, or answer them at all.¹

The LORD's heart breaks for a people who keep turning away from him.

¹ I owe the idea of this sentence to a translation of Hosea 11:7, by James L. Mays.

And the LORD's heart breaks for *us*, who keep turning away from him.

I mean, is there anybody here who's run away?

Is there anybody who's in a place you swore you'd never be?

Is there anybody here this morning who is in unfriendly hands?

Is there anybody who's unsettled, and you have this sinking feeling that you're not at home?

Is there anybody here who has run so far away...or rebelled so deliberately...or turned away so many times...that nobody should take you back?

Is your running away too much for a human heart to handle?

Friends, if any part of that resonates with you this morning, there is good news for you.

God keeps wanting you.

God kept wanting Israel.

Israel turned away over and over and over.

They murdered and cheated and lied.

They were arrogant and ungrateful.

They sought help from hands that harmed them.

When they were scared, they'd come back home for a little while, but they never never returned for long. They never stayed for good.

And for the parent waiting at home, all that back-and-forth can get to be too much for a person to bear. It can be too much for a human heart to handle.

And you can understand if God ended up wanting to give the whole thing up. To stop making himself so vulnerable by taking them back. You can understand if he wanted to close the door once and for all, and to change the locks. You can understand if he stopped answering the phone and ignored his emails, because he knows he's just going to get hurt again.

And here in Hosea, the LORD's heart seems to be just like a human heart. He's devastated over his sweet little one, who keeps running away. And how could anybody blame him if he finally said one day, "I'm done, and you're getting what you deserve"?

But the LORD's heart is stronger and more pure than a human heart.

This is what he says to Israel: "How can I give you up?

How can I turn you over?

Even now – even given all you've done to me – my heart is filled with compassion.

I'm not going to destroy you, and I won't give you up.

You're my baby."

And this is why he's able to say that. He says:

"I am God, and not a human being. I am the Holy One in your midst. When I called you as my child, I promised you that I'd keep wanting you. I am not a human being that I should lie, nor a human being that I should grow weary or change my mind. I am the true God! Do I speak and not act? Do I promise

and not fulfill?"²

And so God tells Israel, "I'm not done with you.
My heart aches for you with human tenderness.
But because I'm God, nothing can break my resolve to keep you."

People of God:
God's love is greater than ours.
His determination is unbreakable.
His love is tender like a daddy, but it is also fierce like a lion.
When we turn our backs on him, he doesn't just say, "It's okay; it's okay."

There's a price that has to be paid.

In the person of Jesus Christ, God came to rescue this runaway race of flesh and blood by becoming flesh and blood himself.

God came to his children by taking on flesh and dwelling among us.

And the prophet Isaiah says:
He was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities,
and the punishment that brought us peace was upon him.
We all had gone astray, and each of us turned to our own ways;
but the LORD laid on him the iniquity of us all."³
And people of God, by his wounds, he heals us and brings us home.

He's not a mere human being so that he'd give up on us.
And he's not some far-away God who's distant and doesn't care.
He is the Holy One in our midst.

Because he is God, he is powerful to bring us home.
And because he is flesh-and-blood human, his salvation reaches to *us*.
And his love is a love that will not let us go.

I have a friend who recently returned from a trip to Uganda. She met a missionary there named Stephanie. And Stephanie was in the process of adopting a little five-year-old Ugandan girl named Lily. From the minute Stephanie laid eyes on Lily, she loved her. And for the past year, Stephanie was in the process of getting all the paperwork in order to make Lily's adoption official.

But Lily lived through some hard things when she was very little. And Lily has what's called Reactive-Attachment Disorder. It means she never learned how to trust, or to bond. And raising Lily this past year has been so difficult. When Stephanie gets close, Lily pushes away. When Stephanie says, "I love you," Lily says, "I hate you."

2 Hosea 11:9; Numbers 23:19

3 From Isaiah 53:4-6

And Stephanie was describing to my friend how hard it's been to love a little girl who doesn't love her back. And my friend asked her, "Have you thought about just stopping the adoption before it's finalized?"

And Stephanie said: "On one of the hardest days we had, I did consider it. She was having a fit. She threw herself down and said, 'You're not my mom.' When I tried to get close, she hit me."

And Stephanie was so desperate, she reached a breaking point. She didn't know what to do. So even though Lily was swinging at her, she got close and picked her up, and she held her like a baby. Lily was crying, and Stephanie was crying, and she rocked her like a baby. And she kept whispering in her ear, "I love you, you're mine; I love you, you're mine. I promised to be your mom, and I am. I love you, you're mine; I love you, you're mine."

People of God, Stephanie is not God. She's able to love Lily only because *God* loves Lily. Stephanie's able to keep her promise to Lily only because *God* is keeping his promise to Lily.

Any compassion we feel in your hearts is just a drop of the compassion of God.

And any determination we have to keep loving someone is only a fraction of the fierce determination of God.

We're merely human, so we grow tired and want to give up. But the LORD does not give up.

We can't change anybody's mind (no matter how badly we wish we could)...but the LORD can change even the most hardened heart. And he does.

When holding on is too much for our hearts to handle, God perseveres.

Now listen: some of you here this morning are runaways.

Maybe you're five steps from where you're supposed to be.

Maybe you're five hundred thousand steps away.

Maybe you don't remember why you took off, or why you keep running.

Maybe all you know is that you're far from home, but you don't know how to get back.

Maybe you don't know if you're worth taking back.

If that's you, the Spirit says, in truth, this morning:

God keeps wanting you.

God keeps wanting you.

God keeps wanting *you*.

He says: "Stop running away. Turn around and leave those things behind. Be done with it, and come to me."

This morning – here, now – he comes roaring like a lion to rescue you from enemy hands.

And as soon as you're in his arms, he'll hold you like a baby to his cheek.

It doesn't matter who you are, or what you've done, or how far you've gone.

He is faithful.

He will rescue you, and he'll bring you home.

If this morning you hear his voice, let him take you home.

He is good, and his love endures forever.
And his faithfulness is great.

Amen?

Thanks be to God!