

“A Change of Heart”

Rev. Jayneann McIntosh, Lead Pastor
First United Methodist Church of Wausau
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Hosea 2:14-20

Therefore, I will now allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. From there I will give her her vineyards, and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. There she shall respond as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt. On that day, says the Lord, you will call me, “My husband,” and no longer will you call me, “My Baal.” For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be mentioned by name no more. I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety. And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord.

Mark 2:14-22

As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him. And as he sat at dinner in Levi’s house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples—for there were many who followed him. When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” When Jesus heard this, he said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.” Now John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and people came and said to him, “Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” Jesus said to them, “The wedding guests cannot fast while the bridegroom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day. “No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; otherwise, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.”

“Dana used to hide the bruises on her neck with her long... hair... [until] Ted ambushed Dana... as she walked from her car to a crafts store... Slashing with a knife, Ted, a pharmaceutical scientist, lopped off Dana's ponytail, then grabbed her throat, adding a fresh layer of bruises to her neck...

Last year [Dana] lost most of her hearing after Ted slammed her against the living-room wall of their home and kicked her repeatedly... Later, he was tearfully despondent, and Dana... believed his apologies... [believed], even when more assaults followed.”¹

We talked about “God-incidents” last week – when events or circumstances happen together in ways that seems more Spirit-led than random. I experienced this last month.

When I chose scripture readings a few weeks ago, I did not plan to bring up domestic violence. I thought I was taking the easy way out in a busy week – choosing readings from the Lectionary often used before Lent begins. That’s what I was thinking but God seems to have been working through this. Because in the last two weeks interpersonal abuses and human trafficking have come up – in conversation, in the news, and in meetings more than a few times. Like you, I knew that Wausau is along a major human trafficking corridor. But when Mary Ann Dykes brought up the Super Bowl and human trafficking I was taken aback. I don’t think my jaw dropped but I’d never put together that prostitution is big at sporting events and more workers would be needed.

Then, Monday morning, I opened my bible commentary to our Hosea text to study as I reflected and prayed about this morning, I was reminded about the context of the prophet’s words as I read Dana’s story.

Hosea uses the metaphor of marriage between two people to speak of God’s relationship with Israel. It’s not a happy marriage - the wife is adulterous; the husband feels anguished. This

¹ Jill Smolowe, “When Violence Hits Home,” *Time*, July 4, 1994 as found in *The New Interpreters Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, volume vii, 226.

parallels the relationship between God and Israel. Israel's worship of Baal and other gods is unfaithful to their covenant with God. By ancient law, such behavior is punishable by death but instead – so Hosea writes – God will only punish her, violently. This is what comes just before what [name] read.

In a world where women were their husbands' property this may have seemed fine to men though I wonder if, even then, women might have taken issue. Today we certainly have to speak out about this violence we find preserved in scripture. Hosea has been used by men to discourage female leadership in the church but more than that, it was used to validate patriarchal systems that kept women oppressed for thousands of years – supporting the violence that was committed, systems of toxic dependencies and all sorts of inhumanity.

Too long was a woman deemed property of the husband. Roman law allowed a man to beat, divorce, even murder his wife for any offense which dishonored him. 600 years ago, the Church's endorsed "The Rules of Marriage" which encouraged the husband to beat his wife with a stick for her offense – beating showed concern for her soul. The phrase "rule of thumb" referred to the later English common law, which allowed a husband to beat his wife as long as he used a stick no bigger than his thumb.

In the U.S. the feminist movement of the 1960s finally started to bring the problems of domestic abuse to public attention. And by the '80s most states had laws in place about domestic violence.² We might hope such labelling would have solved the problem, yet violence against women and children continues. We have our heads in the sand if we believe otherwise. The International Labour Organization estimates there are 21 million victims of human trafficking globally. Most are women and girls. The same organization estimates that worldwide forced labor and human trafficking is a \$150 billion industry.

With sadness, acknowledging that some of you care only about more local concerns, we have no official estimate of the number of human trafficking victims in the U.S. It's estimated to be in the hundreds of thousands when we include adults and minors, labor and sex trafficking. 1 out of 6 runaways reported were likely child sex trafficking victims. And the numbers increases yearly.³

Back to domestic violence... According to the FBI, males murder nearly 90% of female victims. In a third of the cases, the suspect was the husband or boyfriend. In contrast, a wife or girlfriend murdered only 3% of male victims.⁴ A woman is beaten every 18 seconds. One third of women who visit emergency rooms are there for injuries related to ongoing domestic abuse. Most women who are in prison are single mothers who have been victims of domestic and/or sexual abuse.⁵ Men who have witnessed their parents' domestic violence are three times more likely to abuse their wives.

Violence is part of the human condition. Our hearts cry for those people who have faced abuse and those who commit it. I can say this with integrity because while I've never faced such a violation, my mother was abused by a family member. My child was molested by a family friend. Most of us know people who have endures what no one should have to face.

We think we have matured as a people, yet we are still so skilled at directing blame. Too many people still think we shouldn't talk about it. Some say, "She shouldn't have dressed like that." Or, "If you run away you deserve what you get." We're good at shaming others. And ourselves. The church too has been good at shaming. But this was wrong. Shame is not part of the gospel message. Jesus never shames.

If this is part of your story; hear me that you are not to blame; it's not your fault. You deserve loved, just as you are. Nothing, not even this, can separate you – or any of us – from God's love. No matter what has happened or what we have had to do to survive, all of us are precious to God. If you need to talk to someone, talk to me or someone else you trust.

As Christ in the world, we'll walk with you through this valley, accompanying you until you can find a new hope-filled future. We each have more people who care about us than we know. First Church is a community who want all of us to be whole. This happens as we accept that God loves us and wants joy and hope and peace for everyone.

² Swisher K. and Wekesser C. (Eds) *Violence Against Women* Greenhaven, Press, San Diego, 1994, as found in Jackie Davis, "Domestic Abuse", Cabot Police Department, School of Law Enforcement Supervision Session XVII, at cjl.edu/site/assets/files/1921/domestic_abuse_report.pdf (last found February 2, 2018).

³ National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, missingkids.org/lin6 as seen on February 2, 2018.

⁴ "Crime in the United States - 1999 Federal Bureau of Investigation," Washington D.C. October 2000 as found in Jackie Davis, "Domestic Abuse."

⁵ Karen L. Cox, "Most Women in Prison Are Victims of Domestic Violence. That's Nothing New," Time, October 2, 2017 time.com/4960309/domestic-violence-women-prison-history/

I asked my FB friends what they'd most want to hear in a sermon like this one: Carol wrote: "I am a... survivor of domestic abuse, physical... emotional and sexual abuse.... The most important thing people need to know aside from they are not alone is that there is help... for them. I wasted 10 years of my life afraid... because I didn't know there was... someone ... out there to help me.... believing in God isn't enough in the moment. They need to feel safe first and then be brought back to God!... After I was out of my situation I spent... 15+ years lost and suicidal until [a friend] brought me back to God. My whole life has changed... once the person is safely away from the abuse... They need to believe there is a future... in others and especially in God!"

Acknowledging that, statistically, some of us gathered here have been or are currently affected by such violence, let's consider our second scripture reading.

Jesus has been sitting with people who have not been following God's lead for their lives. They are eating, probably laughing, when some religious leaders ask the disciples, "What's he doing with them?" Jesus must have overheard because he responds, "Healthy people don't need a doctor but sick people do."

He goes on to say he came to call sinners. We all stray from God's path so by definition, we all sin. Jesus came for all of us. If today's topic does not touch your story, you know the places in your life where you need this care Jesus offers. Jesus came to draw us into God's love, to help us grow closer to God and each other in ways that honor the holy in each of us. There's a hymn in TFWS:

*Sacred the body God has created, temple of Spirit that dwells deep inside.
Cherish each person; nurture creation. Treat flesh as holy, that love may abide.*

*Love respects persons, bodies and boundaries. Love does not batter, neglect, or abuse.
Love touches gently, never coercing. Love leaves the other with power to choose.*

Yes, we will keep missing the mark, but the more we practice the more we grow in faith. The world will only change when we as people change our hearts. This is part of the good news Jesus proclaimed when he came to turn the world upside-down.

He taught that we need to open ourselves to God's way of peace and wholeness. This happens as we allow God to change our hearts. This is the good news for us and for all of creation. Let us pray that we will be open to God's way today and always.