

"Married . . . with Children"
Sermon for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary Year C
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Text: Hosea 1:2-10
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On April 5, 1987, the then-fledgling Fox network first aired a new sitcom about a dysfunctional family living in Chicago. *Married . . . with Children* ran for 11 seasons, with 262 episodes and 3 specials. The show, as you recall, dealt with the Bundy family. Alphonse "Al" Bundy, played by Ed O'Neill, was the head of the household and the show's protagonist. He was afflicted by the so-called "Bundy curse," which consigned him to an unrewarding career selling women's shoes and a life with a family that constantly mocked and disrespected him. Margaret, "Peggy" or "Peg" Bundy, played by Katey Sagal, was Al's lazy, selfish, big-haired wife who spent most of her time parked in front of the TV watching talk shows or robbing Al blind to go shopping. She was a monumentally inattentive mother and nagging wife who only laughed when Al or their kids begged for food.

They had two children. Daughter Kelly, played by Christina Applegate, was the eldest child of the Bundy clan, a stereotypical dumb blonde who often was derided as a slut and who dated a parade of losers who got under Al's skin. And then there was Bud, played by

David Faustino, the younger of Al and Peg's children, who was unpopular, girl crazy, but the comparatively smart offspring. Most storylines of the series involved a scheming Al being foiled by his cartoonish dim wit and bad luck.

The show was pretty much the polar opposite of early television family sitcoms, such as *Ozzie and Harriett*, *Father Knows Best*, *The Donna Reed Show*, and *Leave It to Beaver*, but it also bore a closer resemblance to real life. As it turns out, it bore an even closer resemblance to the biblical family we are introduced to this morning, a family even more dysfunctional than the Bundys ever were portrayed as being. It's the story of Hosea, his wife, Gomer, and their three children with the worst names kids ever have been given.

The story starts out in an unusual way and then gets even weirder. The text begins by stating, "When the Lord first spoke *through* Hosea, . . ." It's important to note this language. We know that the role of the prophet is to be a vehicle through which God communicates with his people. Most of time, God gives the prophet an oracle or set of instructions to pass along to the people. Occasionally, God's will is communicated through the prophet by means of symbolic action, that is, the prophet is to *do* something that will make it clear what the Lord is trying to say to the people.

For example, on one occasion God commands Jeremiah to wear a yoke around his neck to symbolize that the Lord has authorized the people to submit to the rule of Babylon until such a time when God will liberate them. Later, after the exile of the ruling class of Judah to Babylon, God instructs Jeremiah to buy the field of his kinsman as a symbol of future hope of the restoration of the land to the exiled people of God. These symbolic actions function in the same way as prophetic oracles, instructions, or other kinds of pronouncements.

It is Hosea's lot in life, not unlike Al Bundy's curse, to have the opportunity of experiencing the mother of all prophetic symbolic actions, one that is as bad as it gets. God tells the prophet that he is to marry a prostitute so that he can understand himself and then symbolically represent to Israel what it means for God to be in covenant with a people who are perpetually unfaithful.

Chances are that Gomer, the woman in question, was a cult prostitute in the temple of Ba'al, the fertility god of the Canaanites. The Israelites struggled with Ba'al worship, not because they believed the fertility god was in any way equal to or superior to YHWH, the covenant God of Israel. The homage the people paid to Ba'al was more like an insurance policy, whereby their agricultural security would be guaranteed [Soards et al, p. 95]. By worshiping Ba'al alongside the Lord, the Israelites were just covering their bases.

So God commands Hosea to marry a woman who could not possibly be faithful to him. Promiscuity was second nature to her, so that if given any opportunity at all, she would take up with another lover. In other words, this was an arranged marriage from hell. That's why being a prophet of the Lord in ancient Israel was the worst possible job anyone could have. It always came with more than its share of pain and suffering.

So the dysfunctional nature of Hosea's family begins with his having to marry a prostitute. Through that symbolic action, God wants to communicate to the people what its like to be in a relationship, like the one between God and Israel, where one party, in this case God, is always faithful and true, while the other party, in this case Israel, almost never is. With respect to God, Israel is a prostitute, selling herself to other gods as a way of seeking security, the security that she should realize can come only from God.

The dysfunctional nature of the Hosea clan continues. As it turns out, Hosea and Gomer are married . . . with children. You have heard me talk before about the importance of names in the Old Testament. Names meant everything. Names were to reflect the nature and character of the individual. Names were descriptive and carried with them a sense of calling and purpose. This is still true in our culture to a certain extent. Parents may give their children family names in order

to honor past generations of individuals. Children, especially boys, may be given the same name as their parents. Children may be named for notable individuals in the world of politics or industry or entertainment. Children may be named for the state or city in which they were conceived. Children may simply be given a name their parents like for one reason or another.

The names given to the children of Hosea and Gomer were symbolic actions as well. They had a prophetic meaning. The first born was a son, and he was given the name Jezreel. It is a reference to a specific location, which is meant to symbolize what the people had become. As a location, Jezreel was the second capital of the Omride dynasty. It was the place where Queen Jezebel conspired and had Naboth murdered, allowing King Ahab to claim the man's family vineyard. It also was the place where Jehu killed both Ahab and Jezebel. In other words, it was a place of power politics [*Ibid.*]. Jezreel later would become the place where the army of Israel suffers a significant military defeat, signaling the loss of kingship and the toppling of an empire, a poignant message to the people of Hosea's day that real security was not to be found in the empires of this world and their political machinations [White, *Feasting on the Word, Year C*, Vol. 3, p. 273].

Hosea and Gomer's next child is a girl, whom the prophet is instructed to name Lo-ruhamah, which means, "no mercy" or "not to be pitied" or even "not loved at all." Any child given such a name, especially a daughter, would be an embarrassment for the parents and for the nation. On a larger scale, the name suggests that YHWH will no longer forgive a people who have been unfaithful for far too long [*Ibid.*]. The naming of the child Lo-ruhamah, therefore, must be seen as a negation on God's part of his most fundamental attribute, grace or mercy [Soards et al, p. 96].

This is the God who is supposed to be slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. But he has about had it with his people. So what God is saying through the naming of this child is that he no longer is willing to cut Israel the kind of slack he has in the past. He is through being tolerant; his patience has run out. When it comes to the treasure of God's grace, Israel has just about overdrawn her account.

Then comes the third child, another son, and here is where the road ends. The wheels come off at this point. The baby of the family is to be named Lo-ammi, which signifies that Israel has become in God's eyes a "non-people." In the naming of this child, God is saying to the people that they no longer are to be considered his people, and he is no longer to be considered their God. This is the language of rejection and estrangement and abandonment [*Ibid.*]. The special ties binding

this people to their God have unraveled, not because of what God has done, but because of the self-destructive choices the people have made [Cousar et al, p. 441]. God is walking away and leaving Israel behind.

What are we to make of this episode of biblical *Married . . . with Children*? It is far too easy and simplistic for us to think that no such thing would happen to us since we don't worship Ba'al or any other deity *per se*. But we, too, chase after other gods, especially when we consider that what the Lord is so upset about in this case is that the people are madly seeking their security in almost everything but God. Yes, Ba'al is *their* crop insurance, but on what are *we* counting to take care of us? What insurance policies do we have stuck in a drawer or file cabinet to make sure we always are safe and secure?

But even more to the point, aren't we just as dependent on the world of power politics as Israel was? Who can deny, for example, that our addiction to foreign oil compromises our integrity as a nation every single day? There is simply no way of knowing or measuring the effect that our oil dependence has on our policies and programs both domestically and internationally. We may claim that it is in God we trust, but it is big oil we count on to sustain our lifestyle. And we have prostituted ourselves as a nation to feed our endless need for this dwindling resource.

We as citizens of the United States have felt that we have held a special place in God's heart. There is a certain sense of entitlement and even arrogance that such a feeling has fostered down through the years. What if God were to say to us as a nation that our favored status has run its course? What if we, as Americans, are now not to be especially blessed in God's eyes and not to be pitied for that loss by the rest of the world? What if God is no longer merciful and forgiving and has turned his back on us for the same reasons he turned his back on the Northern Kingdom of Israel when Hosea was its prophet?

And yet . . . and yet. Along with condemnation, there is a note of hope in this passage of scripture. In the case of Israel in the time of Hosea, these sinful people are YHWH's people still. They are persons of God's own choosing, connected by ties that never can be totally severed or dissolved. And so, even when it appears that the final word of God's judgment has been spoken, there is still a further word of restoration: ". . . in the place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' it shall be said to them, 'Children of the living God.'" We are God's children, and fortunately we worship a Parent God who ultimately will not forsake his sons and daughters [*Ibid.*]. But let this version of *Married . . . with Children* be a sobering reminder of where we should and should not seek our security. Our faith—our belief, our trust, and our obedience—is to rest in God and God alone.