

Hosea 11:1-11; Psalm 107  
July 31, 2016  
“A Cord of Love”  
Rev. Clover Reuter Beal

Biblical scholar, Walter Brueggemann, said Hosea 11 is among the most remarkable oracles in the entire prophetic literature. He said, this is a poem before which we should sit quietly in utter amazement, because in it we see the interior life of the heart and mind of God. So, let's do that.

Let us pray: Bring the power and surprise of your holy scripture into our hearts and minds this morning. Crack us open to new ways of seeing you, to hearing you. Move us into a deeper knowledge of you so that we might risk giving ourselves to your liberating love. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen

If you've been around young children at all, you know that a little one enjoys being chased by mom or dad or caregiver, squealing with delight as they run from them. Sometimes it looks like the parent is having fun; but sometimes it looks like they might be on their last nerve. There's also nothing that makes a parent's blood run more cold than having their child disappear from eye-shot in a public space.

That's why someone invented the **child leash**. Maybe you've seen a child wearing one-- at the mall or Disneyland. The intense leash systems have a harness like a bungee jumper's cinched around the 2 year olds' torso; the more subtle model just hitches at the wrist. Either way, Mom or dad can keep a grip on their kid's unpredictable movements.

My husband, Tim's, says his parents put him on a long, long leash (metaphorical) as a child. Instead of being the “Long arm of the Law” that would have kept him always in close range, Tim's parents' risky strategy was to give him and his sister *long leashes of trust*.

Anyone who has ever loved a child hopes beyond hope that as their child grows he or she will navigate the rough waters of life with brains and heart; with the good sense to use their freedom wisely. That at the bedrock of our hope is that our child will grow to be happy, healthy, kind and a contributing member to society.

But we all know that a child doesn't come with a “Certificate of Guarantee” not to have any “issues,” or that they will always make good decisions. Most parents I know have spent countless nights worrying whether their teenager would make it through the door safely in the wee hours.

Tim and I went to a Free Methodist college. As a religion major, I was schooled in the Wesleyan understanding or theology of God that stressed the *primacy of free will* in a person's life. I understood and held that each person has the choice to walk

toward or *away* from God — to walk away from GRACE, that is — and to freely reject God's offer.

Tim on the other hand was rooted in more of a Reformed theology – he embraced the belief that, when all is said and done, it is impossible to walk away from God's grace. We might think we are walking away, even running away and rejecting it, but in Truth...each of us is on a very, very, very long leash of grace and love. Divine love, as good Calvinists taught, will not let us go.

We are tethered—gently-- by cords of God's kindness and bands of love, whether we like it or not. This poem from Hosea offers us one of the most intimate biblical images we have of the heart of a parental God who loves tenaciously and fiercely a child who keeps running away.

In the first 4 verses God speaks in the first person repeatedly.

v. 3 Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. 4 I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them.

When Israel was a child, God said,  
...I loved... I called.  
    And the more I called, the faster they ran;  
        I taught, I healed, I led,  
I lifted and nuzzled them to my cheek,  
    I bent down; I fed them.  
I did this all for them!

God says I did all this for you before you were even aware of me!

Few of us remember our early childhoods. We've heard stories and seen photos or videos and gone through memory albums:

*"This is when you were a baby-- oh, I couldn't stop kissing you! This is when you started crawling. This is when you took your first step and I was so proud. This is you at 3 years old in Target when you threw a tantrum ---and people had to step over you in the aisle because we wouldn't buy you the Disney Pocahontas doll head. Hypothetical, of course. "This is when you were sick and I tended you through the late hours of the night. This is when you were learning to ride a bike and kept falling off and I picked you up and set you straight, again and again."*

It's important to revisit photo albums as much for the parent's sake as for our children-- so *that* when parents face the rough patches that test our undying love, *WE will be reminded* just how much We have loved, and still cherish our child.

Loving a child is not easy work, to say the least. No relationship can make one's heart swell with more love and affection than you ever thought possible, nor open you up to more hurt and pain than you believed you could endure.

Like every parent, God is vulnerable to the hurt brought on by the beloved.

God in this story has hit a very rough patch. And God is responding to Israel's insolent adolescent rejection of all they've been taught. Israel has run away to another god: The Assyrian god, Baal. The Israelites want to go back to Egypt, to the very hell hole God brought them out of from slavery.

Even after God kept them alive during those brutal years in the wilderness;  
Even after God gave them a beautiful land as their own;  
they abused their land and its people, and risked their covenantal relationship with God.

"After all I've done for you, You want to go back to the place that nearly destroyed you?? Fine, go! You can choose Egypt over me if you are hell-bent on destruction, you're on your own!"

As a parent, I have to admit that this is not a far-fetched feeling. There's nothing like a recalcitrant teenager that can get a parent ranting. I remember my parents enraged more than a few times in my house.  
My dad wryly would say, "You buttered your bread, now lie in it."

Just on the verge of allowing Israel to live with the consequences of their self-destructive behavior; just on the edge of taking off the leash and turning them loose... God, like a parent, pauses ... And God's heart recoils within.

God's heart winces, draws back within God's self.  
"How could I even threaten to abandon my own children?"  
God is horrified at the mere thought.

"I will not let you destroy yourself. It is against my very nature.  
This is not who I AM. I am no mortal. My love is not like human love.  
I am compassionate, kind, abounding in steadfast love and patience."

I have made a covenant to care for you, to expect the best of you, to believe in you, to tear you from trouble every time you are a hair's breath away from making a total mess of your life.

You see, When we go low, God goes low too.  
God closes the distance between us;  
God stoops low enough to get eye to eye with us;  
God steps right into the messes we make for ourselves.

The consequences of Israel's rebellious actions were taken into God's own heart. Like a steadfast mother, God drew into herself the hurt brought on by her children.

Which rekindled her tender compassion. God picked up and nuzzled them to her cheek and kissed them and set them down gently and brushed them off and let them try again. God held Israel's yesterdays in pictures no one else remembered: waiting for Israel to be born, to take its first steps, speak its first words, held all its tears, and expected Israel to grow into a mature adult that would live out the covenant relationship.

The passage ends with another metaphor: God as lion executing care for her cubs with fierce love --calling the children home with trembling.

For most of us, it was from the front porch that moms called their kids home at the end of the day. Today, it's mostly through texting.

A couple of years ago I had a conversation with a mother who had made some pretty bad decisions herself as a teenager. Thus she was determined not to allow her own daughter to repeat her mistakes. But her teenage daughter had been getting into all sorts of trouble, experimenting with bad, bad stuff-- way beyond her years. The mother told me that she was +this+ close to saying, I'm done. I can't stand this anymore. I'm cutting you loose!

But Instead, she remembered her own childhood. Her need for someone to reach down and grab her by the scruff of the neck. She also remembered her daughter and her sweetness as a little girl. The mom's anger turned into a ferocious compassion; and that mother became a like a lion who followed her girl into dangerous neighborhoods at great risk to her own safety. She told me that she pulled her girl kicking and screaming out of those neighborhoods more than once--literally carrying her cub back to the safety of the den.

That's the kind of God we have here in Hosea. The God of ferocious compassion who extends love beyond our human comprehension. A God who grabs us by the scruff of the neck, time and time again and says, Come on Home. This is the same loving father from the parable Jesus told-- who loved extravagantly, prodigiously, more than the wayward son deserved.

God's fierce love was made visible when God stooped so low to become one of us—in the flesh in Jesus Christ. God entered into the fray of humankind. God went to the depths of anguish, like a lion roaring out from the cross, giving voice to a painful love for each of us.

"I lead them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love," God says about each of us. We are on long leashes, my friends. There's no escaping that kind of God with that kind of love. Dr. Brueggemann was right. We should sit quietly in utter amazement.