

HOSEA NO. 7
December 11th, 1988
There is Forgiveness with God

Hosea 5:13-6:3

TEXT COMMENTS:

v. 3: Some commentators have supposed that these three verses opening chapter 6 are meant to be taken as a parody, Hosea's sarcastic portrayal of the people's false hope that God will very soon deliver them from their oppressors; that Hosea presents this attitude in order to contradict it with his message of certain doom, the people of Israel having passed the point of no return in their rebellion against God and his covenant.

But this is surely an incorrect interpretation. It may strike us as strange that Hosea should insert such an encouraging and hopeful word in the midst of a message of such unrelenting condemnation; but that alternation of passages of doom and hope is characteristic of the whole book. It is true that Hosea does not contemplate that his contemporaries as a whole will experience this wonderful side of God—they are to be judged; but at some point in the future God will return to his people with grace on his face. The 'us' refers not to Hosea's contemporaries, nor the two and three days time to that very moment of history, anymore than when God said to Israel in the wilderness in Deuteronomy 4, 'I will send *you* into exile' he meant that very generation of his people. He is referring to God's people generically and as they will exist some distant time in the future and to the day when he returns to bless them, whenever that might be.

How like the Bible to speak in such extremes and to place such extremes side by side. Hosea has been hammering away at Israel with his message of doom, with his grim promise that she is about to fall under God's unrelenting judgment. And now, in the next breath, Hosea proclaims the compassion and mercy of God, his willingness to forgive his people in defiance of the wrongs they have committed against him!

It is as if Hosea could not bear to say so much about God's wrath and judgment without reminding his hearers that God is still more a God of mercy and of love—and, on the assumption that even in wicked Israel in

the later 8th century B.C. God had not left himself without a witness, no doubt there were some individuals who loved the Lord, who were greatly encouraged to be reminded of the depths of compassion and mercy in the heart of the Almighty.

Last Lord's Day morning I spoke as sternly and unbendingly as I could about what occurs when people carry their rebellion against God so far as to exhaust God's patience with them, and how such people can pass the point of no return in their spiritual existence. I take not one word of that sermon back; it is all true and it is imperative that we believe it and act according to it.

But now, there is another part of the truth which is before us; as important, no, more important than the other; a part of the truth which must be held firmly alongside the other, neither being diminished, neither crowding out the other.

SAY WHAT WE MUST OF THE WRATH OF GOD, OF THE PATIENCE OF GOD HAVING ITS LIMITS, OF GOD FORSAKING NOW AND FOREVER PEOPLE WHO REPEATEDLY IGNORE AND REFUSE HIS APPEALS TO REPENT OF THEIR SINS AND TRUST IN CHRIST FOR SALVATION—

It is also true that God is a God of such great mercy, that he will forgive and restore human beings to fellowship with himself and to his favor and blessing, even when they are guilty of every manner of sin against him; even when they have defied his grace and spurned his commandments and abused his gifts and when they have done all of this repeatedly and constantly.

Yes, we dishonor God's character if we do not ascribe to him that justice and holy wrath of which we spoke last week; but we dishonor God's character yet more, if we do not ascribe to Him and take seriously in our hearts and reckon with in our lives his delight in showing mercy, his infinite capacity for compassion, and his almighty love for utterly undeserving human beings. And we are not living as the true children of this living God, if we do not have etched upon our hearts always the greatness of God's mercy to us and the astonishing power and sweep of the forgiveness which he has granted us in Jesus Christ, and all the more on such a Christmas communion Sunday as this.

The terrible challenge which a minister faces with such a text to preach and

on a communion Sunday is not to tell you that God's grace reaches the heights and the depths and that he is wonderful in mercy. No the challenge is much greater; it is to make you feel the greatness of that divine love in your souls, the power of it, the penetration of it, the glory of it. To make you exclaim, with a true wonder in your heart—'how could such mercy be given to me' and how passing thought that a God who knows *my heart* should still want and be able to forgive all my sins? How is it possible that he should be able to forget so much that I have done and that I have failed to do? How is it possible that my thoughts, words, and deeds have not forever poisoned his pure and holy mind against me? And wonder of wonders, how can he love me so much and suffer so much for my pardon, when he knew beforehand how ungrateful I would be for the gift of eternal life when once he had given it to me?

It is one thing to say that God grants, to us who trust in him and in Christ Jesus his Son, full and free and ever-lasting forgiveness of all the wrongs, injuries, and offenses we have ever done against God, against our Savior, against our neighbor, and against ourselves.

BUT, BELIEVE ME, BELOVED, IT IS ANOTHER THING ALTOGETHER TO FEEL, TO KNOW IN THE HEART, TO EXPERIENCE IN THE SOUL THE WONDER, THE EXHILARATION, THE TREMENDOUS MYSTERY, THE SHUDDERING IMPACT OF THAT FACT AND THAT TRUTH IN THE FULL FACE OF WHAT WE KNOW TO BE THE TRUTH ABOUT OUR OWN MISERABLE HEARTS AND OUR OWN SHAMEFUL AND SELF-WORSHIPPING LIVES FULL OF EVERY SINGLE KIND OF SIN BOTH OF COMMISSION AND OMISSION.

And, it is precisely that feeling and sense and experience of divine mercy in your soul that I am after this Sabbath and communion morning. And to that end, I am going to take you to another deathbed. Not to last week's deathbed, where sinners, long passed the point of no return neither seek nor find the grace and forgiveness of God; but to another kind of deathbed altogether—and that it was a Christmas deathbed only makes the point more telling, or so I hope and pray.

It was in Holland and not so many years ago.

A shrill, merciless telephone woke me during the night which bridges Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Drunk with sleep I staggered to the desk in my study, picked up the phone and muttered an indifferent greeting. A woman's

voice responded.

‘Am I speaking with the pastor?’ ‘Yes, yes, and you..?’ ‘This is the home of Mr. Karmon. I’m his private nurse. Would it be possible for you to come right over? Mr. Karmon has made special request for you. I know that it is a very inconvenient time, but I’m to ask anyway’. My thinking became clearer. Karmon, of course, since he was very ill. Earlier in the week I had called on him. ‘Certainly, nurse, I’ll come immediately’.

While dressing, my thoughts were occupied with Mr. Karmon. He was an unusual person. He had been a widower for many years. An elderly, grey-haired housekeeper took care of him and his home. Karmon was very shy and reserved. Earlier in life he had been a successful manufacturer, but just prior to the War he had turned that business over to younger men. . . . He had now lived for several years almost like a hermit. During the last while he had shown increasing signs of failing health.

A lonesome life, and I now surmised that it would be a lonesome death as well.

Strange, but I knew so little about him. How long had he been a widower? Now that I was thinking about it I realized that I had never heard anyone speak of his wife, and apparently there had been no children.

I knew that he was a man of sound judgment and that he possessed abilities which would entitle him to a place of prominence in life, perhaps also in the life of the church. But there were objections: he never partook of Holy Communion. During the annual home visitation the elders would discuss this with him, but in vain. A particular reason was never volunteered, and although he accepted the admonition with his customary courtesy, his refusal was firm. After a while it was no longer discussed and his name was seldom mentioned.

He and I had also discussed this matter privately, but with the same result. For that matter, whenever conversation turned in the direction of his personal, inner life he would become very uncommunicative, his replies would come with great difficulty, and he would stare vacantly out the window at things far removed from his room.

For the rest Karmon was an exemplary person, a faithful church-goer, honest and generous. During the last weeks I had visited him occasionally, but they weren’t easy visits. His quiet, almost secretive manner was more pronounced

than usual.

It was a few degrees below freezing and the tyres of my bicycle crunched softly on the asphalt pavement of the canal-lined street as I rode through the silent star-lit night, passing house after house with windows staring from corpse-like eyes over the water. With a strange weird effect the bells of the clock in the carillon of the old tower suddenly exploded downward, their peals ricocheting recklessly against gable and tree. I counted the number: the night was almost past, the night of Christmas. In a few hours I would be standing in my pulpit and the congregation would be singing with joy because of the birth of the Christ-child. But in the house to which I was going there was another gathering—the gathering of the shadows of death.

My thoughts returned to Karmon and in my memory arose the case of the orphanage. We needed money and I visited Karmon to solicit a donation from him. He would have to have some time to think it over, he said, but the very next day he called to say that he would pledge a gift of a thousand guilders. There was one express stipulation, however, and that was that his name should not be mentioned. The money had been a real lifesaver for the orphanage. And no one but myself had ever so much as guessed the identity of the donor.

Everything about him was, no, mysterious was not the right word, but nevertheless very unusual: his behavior, his seclusion, his church life. And even his outward appearance, which was marked by heavy black eyebrows and a head of thick grey hair.

And now he had to die. It amazed me that he had asked for me. Was he afraid of death? I didn't know why, but I couldn't easily believe that. Karmon looked to me like one cut out of different wood, although...but shortly I would know.

There stood the high silhouette of his house. A weak beam of light shone between the curtains of an upper window. As softly as possible I rang the doorbell. I heard the muffled creakings of footsteps on the staircase. The nurse opened the door very quietly.

'How is he?' I asked. 'Quite well for the moment. The doctor says that he could linger for several days, but that it might also be all over within a few hours. You know, of course, that he is suffering from a terminal malignancy?'

I nodded as we climbed the staircase. In front of the door leading to the

sickroom stood a Mrs. de Laat, Mr. Karmon's sister-in-law. She was much younger than her brother-in-law and from conversation with her I understood that she had been staying in the Karmon home for a few days in order to assist with the housekeeping and the nursing.

Whisperingly she told me that it had taken some doing to get Karmon to approve of her taking her little daughter with her, even though she could not get away from home without her. She shrugged her shoulders and I couldn't resist the impression that she bore little affection for her sick relative to whose side she had come solely out of a sense of duty. 'He has always had a dislike of children, you know,' she offered.

I thought for a minute about the orphanage, but I simply nodded and followed the nurse into the large room, where, back of a screen, stood a bed. It was immediately noticeable that Karmon had failed rapidly, even in the few days since I had last visited him. In the soft light of the lamp above his bed it looked as if the lines in his face had been carved with a knife and when he turned his head on the pillow his eyes made the slow rotating movement which one sees oftener in those who no longer have a will to resist death's encroachment. His arms lay straight and motionless upon the sheets, the hands powerless. Nevertheless he was an impressive figure, and again I was struck with the contrast between the thickly-planted grey hair and the black eyebrows.

With a weak but audible voice he asked his nurse to excuse us since he wished to speak with me alone. After the door closed with a soft sigh behind her he waited for a few seconds. Then he raised his eyes and looked at me as one who had reached a very hard decision. I began the conversation:

'You asked if I would come; can I help you?' With the same rather thin but yet plain voice he answered, 'Yes, and it is indeed very difficult for you, so late at night, and with such a very busy day tomorrow.' I assured him that this was unimportant now that I knew that it was his desire to see me.

'I would not have called for you,' he continued, 'if I did not have to reckon with the possibility that it might soon be too late. I will not make it much longer, dominie, and before that moment I want to tell you something. First of all, about the orphanage: I have specified a certain amount in my will, but you know, upon the condition that there is as little publicity as possible.'

I tried to thank him, but it is very difficult under such circumstances to find

the right word. It's just as if one is personally signing the death-sentence of the dying. But with a slight movement of his hands he checked further talk on my part and said:

'There is something else. You have not known me fully well, not on the inside. I know that you were dissatisfied with me: the Lord's Supper and perhaps other things, and I am appreciative of the fact that you did not harshly condemn me. Because there was a reason...' He paused, during which I gave him no encouragement to continue, something which he apparently did not expect either.

And then he told his history. There was not much rising or falling in his voice and yet the telling of his story from the very beginning brought with it so much tension that I could not help but listen very intently, strangely fascinated.

'I am,' he began, 'I am now sixty-three years old, actually still young for dying, and yet it is already so long ago. I was married and my wife passed away when our little girl was three years of age. Dominie,' he looked at me, 'you are married and no doubt you love your wife very much. I did, too, and when she died and they carried her away to be buried it was as if they buried my own heart. I was shattered and numb. I lived in emptiness and it was cold, day after day it was cold. Now you must know this too: in my younger years I was very ill-tempered. I was completely careless; when I was eighteen years old I no longer went to church. My father was already dead and my mother could not control me. I went to the university for a year, but let's forget about that. I was hot-headed and rude and sometimes dangerous. Until I met my wife...'

He stopped speaking. So involved was I in his story that I knew exactly where his thoughts were. An expression moved across his face which made him look much younger.

He went on: 'It is even now a mystery to me that she could possibly get to love me, but she did, and she made of me a different—I don't dare to say a better—but I do say a different man. She was of a gentle character and completely trusting. She trusted me too. She taught me to go back to the church and to believe in the Gospel that I had wanted to forget. I prayed and I gave thanks to God and still do it, even though it is... but that comes later'.

It was a heavy silence in that spacious sickroom. . . as if the shadows behind had joined to listen to the telling of these things out of the dark past. I asked if he would like something to drink. He nodded and when I put a glass of fruit juice to his lips he very carefully swallowed a mouthful and licked his lips—it was evident that all this was costing him a great deal of effort.

His voice was somewhat hoarse after drinking, but he went on:

‘We had a child, a daughter. Her name was Marijke after my wife, and she resembled her a great deal. I have already told you that my wife died when Marijke was three. I was inconsolably desperate, for she was the only one that I ever really loved, and love, dominie, is a fearful thing. My old nature came back to the surface. I stood in my room all by myself and cursed God out loud, calling him a brute and a murderer. And then that other thing happened. . . .’

Again he waited. I could sense that this man was battling furiously within himself in order to get across the threshold of silence, that he might reveal the secret he had so anxiously guarded. . . and hated. He swallowed a few times and stared straight ahead into the darkness.

‘Our child was dear and happy, always happy, and it was just that which I could no longer endure. That was a sickness, but it was also an evil. I can hardly believe it now, and yet I’—his voice dropped to a whisper—‘and yet I struck her just because she laughed’. Brokenly he continued: ‘I struck her with the back of my hand flush in her face. I was wearing a ring with a small diamond mounting and her cheek bled. I saw that, but I did not take her into my arms and I did not kiss her and I did not say I was sorry. I simply walked away. She developed blood poisoning and was dead after two days. No one ever suspected it, you are the first one that I have told. I stood at her bedside and she smiled at me once more.’—His voice broke and died away; I saw his lips moving soundlessly:

‘Marijke, Marijke. . . .’

‘Karmon’—neither could I speak with full voice—‘Karmon, you have surely prayed to God to forgiveness?’

There was no answer. He lay very quiet and with a sudden shock the thought rose within me that he might already have died, until I saw the almost imperceptible rise and fall of his breathing. more urgently I repeated my question: ‘Karmon, Karmon. . . .’

It was then that he opened his eyes, eyes so full of terror that to look at them was more than shocking. It was as if I were looking with his eyes through two windows into a desolation so deep that no comfort could possibly find place. I couldn't think of anything to say but, 'You know, of course, that there is grace with God? Even the'—I stumbled over that hard word—'even the murderer with Jesus at the cross received forgiveness.'

Fixedly he kept his eyes on me, 'Yes,' he murmured, 'murderer, that is the right word. But did this murderer of Golgotha murder his own child? A dear innocent child?' It seemed as if he wanted to torture himself with these last words, and he repeated them, 'an innocent child? The murderer, dominie, he was saved, but not Herod who killed the children of Bethlehem.'

Relentlessly he kept his gaze fixed on me. A strange pressure paralyzed my tongue.

'You think I am afraid of death?' His mouth twisted as if in sharp pain and his words sounded rough, 'Dominie, I don't dare to meet my wife and child up there!'

It seemed as if everything stiffened all about us. Now I understood. Now I understood the despair of this man and also that behind this despair lay the eager longing of a human heart for final peace.

I stood up and walked to the window and pushing the curtain aside I saw in the earliest grey light of the morning how the naked arms of the trees were lifted imploringly toward heaven and in my imagination I thought I heard the whispering of the dying man: 'Marijke, Marijke...'

I turned myself about, returned to the bed, back to the beseeching eyes which though voiceless pressed me for an answer. Then I told him of Jesus Christ, God's Son, who came to seek and to save that which was lost. He knew that, of course, for he heard and read it many, many times. And yet I had no other message for him than the simple Gospel.

I spoke of a love of God which is so great that it makes a light to rise in Christ which drives away all shadows of guilt and remorse, yes, which drives away even the shadows which doubt the reality of His endless mercy.

What else could I say to him? To him who lies broken on the battlefield and burning with thirst one gives a sip of pure water and nothing more.

Then I prayed with him, and when I had finished he looked up at me. It was

as if an angel had touched his eyes and cleansed them of all anxiety, of all fear.

‘The curtains,’ he whispered.

I pushed them aside. Morning light stood before the windows. Karmon looked at the dawn and drank of the rising sun.

I softly left the sickroom, returned home, and then went on to church to bring the glad tidings of him who had made it possible for one to find Christmas even near and on a deathbed.

Do you believe that it is possible for such a man, for such a crime to be forgiven by an all-holy God, whose eyes are too pure to behold iniquity, and to be forgiven after so long?

Oh yes! for a certainty it is possible; because our God, the Almighty is the King of Mercy, and he delights to be merciful, and his mercy partakes of his glorious infinity and omnipotence as do all other aspects of his person.

But the question is not really different whether we ask if God’s mercy is great enough to cover old and sad Mr. Karmon’s great sins, or to cover your sins and mine.

Your sin is great, very great; greater than you or I know. If your sins are as mine, my friends, if you have squandered and wasted and trampled upon as much of God’s goodness and grace as I have; if you have tested his patience as doggedly and as long as I have; if you have loved what he hates and hated what he loves as much as I have; if you have ignored him and his honor and his will as much as I have; if you have lived as ungrateful a life in the teeth of God’s generosity as I have; if you have thought as little of Christ and of his terrible sacrifice for my salvation and for yours as I have; then, beloved, I shudder to think of your sins and of what they deserve and of their capacity to inflame the terrible wrath of the Almighty who calls such sin the abominable thing which he hates!

I say, if you, if I were for an instant to see our sin in this world as God sees it, the sight of it would drink up our spirits and cast us into the most inconsolable despair.

But, I say, as great as your sins are and as great as my sins are—the mercy of the Almighty, of the King of Love, will sweep them away like a cloud, like the morning mist.

“Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of his people? You do not stay angry forever, but delight to show show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our transgressions underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.”

And our Savior said: ‘Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden’ — that is, all who feel how great is their sin and how impossible that such a mountain of guilt could ever be removed from their backs — ‘and I will give you rest.’

And he also said: ‘No one who comes to me’ — whatever his condition, however great his sins — ‘no one who comes to me will I ever drive away!’ In Christ’s name, beloved, I invite you and I command you this Communion Sunday and this Christmas time to thrill to and glory in the measureless grace of the Almighty!

‘May your unfailing love rest upon us, O Lord, even as we put our hope in you.’ [Ps 33:22]