

Hosea 3:1-5

Pentecost 17, Supplement Series C, September 11, 2016

Theme: The LORD shows unending love to you

I. He is faithful to his promise

II. He rejoices in your return

INJ We want to protect our children from every danger or disaster. You keep an eye out for them so they don't step into the street. When they are older you take note of the friends they choose, and you help them see qualities of real friendship. Even after your children have left home, you want to help them avoid foolish choices.

Despite our best intentions and intense actions, things hurt us and our children. We can't be perfectly safe. Fifteen years ago when the planes crashed into the Twin Towers, we all felt less safe. Terrorism has stalked us ever since. Yet extremists aren't the only danger our families face – not even the biggest danger. Violence or accidents or health complications are never far away. The media and entertainment corrupt our perspective. You want to grab the children and hold them tightly and close your eyes to all that is bad out there. You love your children. You love your family.

The bad isn't just out there, though. It is also in here, in our own hearts. Our love for family doesn't protect them from everything. Sometimes my love is the problem. I can be selfish. Sometimes I seek what is wrong. When I have been wounded by words or actions, I lash out – not in love, but in anger and resentment. When my love has been battered so long and has experienced so many disappointments, I can turn it off. I don't love you! I won't! Not only do I suffer, then, but so does my family.

God turns our attention away from our own faulty love, and puts it on Jesus' perfect love. We read our Bible and worship together so we see true love in his actions and in his words. Jesus is refreshingly different from every kind of love we see or know outside of Scripture. His love does not end. Through the prophet Hosea we have a powerful picture of the LORD's unending love for us. Even when people are unfaithful, even when the expectation of love is over, even when nothing lovable remains, the LORD shows unending love to us. He is always faithful to his promise and he rejoices in our return. Look at how much our LORD loves us!

The prophet Hosea didn't just preach God's love to people. God had him live as an example to them. Hosea was to marry a woman who was a prostitute. She would not be faithful to him, but he was to be faithful to her. He was to love her even though she despised his love. It was to be a demonstration of God's love for sinners. He is faithful to his promise.

So maybe we should talk about what love is. Despite all the

Hallmark Channel movies and Chick Flicks that are out there, love is not just an emotion. It is not merely a feeling. Love is not some mysterious destiny or unstoppable force, either. Love – the way God talks about it – is determined action. Love is doing for the other. Love is a choice.

The clearest way to illustrate love is to look at God's love for us in Christ. "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son." "God demonstrated his love for us in this, that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." "This is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." God's love is his determined action. He didn't just feel. He determined to step in to save sinners by sending his Son our Savior.

God's love is the foundation for the love a husband and wife show in Christian marriage. Love between spouses is not just warm flutters in the heart. It is determined action. The promise of love "until death parts us" is doing for the other person, seeking their health and happiness, not my own.

God's love for us is also mirrored in the various ways we love one another as friend and neighbor and sister and congregation member. "We love because [God] first loved us." Our love for each other is evidence of our Christian faith. We are determined to do for one another as God has done for us. St. Paul speaks about God's love and our reflection of it as something that is patient and kind, does not keep a record of wrongs, is not self-seeking. Love "always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails."

Yet our love sometimes does fail. Sin tears at our determination to love God and to love our spouse and to love our family and friends. The sin of nagging and the sin of ignoring and the sin of undermining and the sin of untruthfulness and every other sin picks apart our determination to love one another. Unfaithfulness is the obvious wrecking ball to our love. If anything would cause our love to meet its end, unfaithfulness does it.

God slams us with the accusation: you have been unfaithful to me. I am the LORD, the one and only God. We should listen to him and trust him and obey him and worship him above all things. When we let money and position and desire and whatever else take first place in our heart, it is like we are prostitutes cavorting with others. And we cannot deny the charge, can we? We have broken the First Commandment countless times: "You shall have no other gods."

Unfaithfulness shatters relationships. Husbands and wives split. Children are caught in the fray. Anger and resentment and seeking advantage and manipulation are the opposite of love. In the relationships you have seen explode, perhaps you can understand the reaction. But what if God ended his love for you because you were unfaithful to him?

The prophet Hosea was commanded love his unfaithful wife. Her name was Gomer. She was unlovable, yet Hosea was to show her God's love – a love that did not give up and that would not quit. It was a love that did not depend on Gomer at all. God's love is completely one sided. Consider how important this truth is: God does not love you because you are lovable, but he loves you because he is faithful to his promise.

God demonstrated his love in the history of his people. At every turn they were unfaithful to the LORD. They didn't listen to his words. They complained about the blessings he provided. They were stubborn and selfish and they only thought about themselves. The LORD promised to send them a Savior. He was faithful to his promise when he sent his Son into the wreck of a world that sin had corrupted. Jesus gave his life to pay the debt for all those selfish and wayward and rotten sinners. He gave his perfect obedience to the Law as a credit on their account. Jesus determined to take action, loving sinners with an unending love.

God is faithful to his promise to love you. In Holy Baptism he said that your sins are washed away. In the Lord's Supper he shows you forgiveness that is yours through Jesus' body given and his blood shed. When you learn Bible History in SS and at the LES and in Bible Class and in Confirmation Class and at worship, God shows his unending love to you – even though you are unlovable. The LORD is faithful to his promise.

I know it is hard to wrap your head around God's determined love for you. Can you imagine the struggles Hosea had with loving Gomer his unfaithful wife? The emotions must have been overwhelming! Yet there is the LORD's unending love. "Go show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another and is an adulteress. Love her as the LORD loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods."

It wasn't only hard for Hosea. Think about the turmoil Gomer experienced. We don't know much about her, but even if she wanted to behave differently and if she tried to make a change, the shame and disgrace of her past would still haunt her. Did she feel out of place as Hosea showered her with undeserved love? When we feel unlovable, are we reluctant to return to the LORD? Learn one more thing today about the unending love of the LORD: He rejoices in your return.

Hosea went out and brought Gomer back to his home. He provided everything she needed. She was to live with him and not go back to her former way of life. I am sure it was hard to separate from her past. Like it is for us. Notice that God's love does not depend on our pure and decent actions. The LORD rejoices in our return because of his unending love.

Remember the Gospel lesson today? One sheep was lost, and the Shepherd searched for it. One coin was lost, and the whole house was

swept to find it. And when the lost was found, the angels in heaven rejoiced. The LORD rejoices over your return. He wants you close so he can shower you with his unending love.

God's love motivates us to love him with determined action. Turning away from sin and avoiding our weaknesses and clinging to the forgiveness God proclaims to us – all of it is the gift of God. All of it is a fruit of faith, growing out of his undeserved love. He gives us both the desire and the ability to live as his beloved spouse.

We are determined to stay clear of the sins that once ensnared us. But, as soon as I determine not to, I slide back into it. When sinful opportunity sidles up to me, I dive right in. Even though I resist this time, Satan persistently pries into my defenses, and I fail next time. How can I stand up and see the victory when I am overwhelmed by it all?

Don't leave an empty spot where you are avoiding particular sins, or that space will soon be filled with other vices. Fill that space in your heart and mind with God's Word. Recall the Bible History lessons that show the LORD's unending love for you. Come to worship regularly. Gather around God's Word at home. With the LORD's love occupying your attention, you will rejoice to be his bride.

He rejoices in your return. He provides you with the ability and the determination to hate sin. He gives you the confidence to trust his forgiveness in Christ Jesus. He even moves your hands and heart to give him glory. The LORD makes these miracles happen through his words. You have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. His blood was shed for you! The tomb is empty! Your sins are forgiven. All of them. Even that one. Jesus won the victory over sin for you. Return to his unending love!

In our reading, Hosea and his unfaithful wife are a picture of the LORD's love for us. Our God explains an important point: "Afterward the Israelites will return and seek the LORD their God ... They will come trembling to the LORD and to his blessings in the last days." When we return to the LORD, we tremble – not in fear! We tremble because his love does not end. He rejoices in our return! He loves us that much! Though we have been unfaithful, the LORD shows us unending love.

Our determination to love each other is fickle. Our determination to love God is even more unreliable. We will never find stability and safety, never find love, by looking inside ourselves. Look to the LORD who shows unending love to you. He is faithful, even though you are not. He rejoices in your return. Come back to him. Stay with him for many days and revel in the security of his love. Terrorism cannot shake his love. Nothing can. Close your eyes and see the safe picture the LORD provides: He shows you his unending love in Christ Jesus, your Savior. SDG Amen.