

God is not a boy's name *a reflection on Hosea 11:1-11 from Lauryn Awbrey*

I was so happy when I saw that today's set lectionary reading from the Old Testament is Hosea 11. It gave me a warm feeling, a happy glow, as I took time to reacquaint myself with this passage that I have loved ever since I studied it as a theology student. Not only do I have a warm glow, I also have a prop for today's sermon, a mug which my mother gave me about 30 years ago: it says... "God is not a boy's name."

It was a great mug to have around the house when I was raising 3 little boys, because it started some good conversations. I don't know if they remember those talks about God, but I do. And it seems to me, for all sorts of reasons, that this is a conversation which we still need to be having. Women still struggle for basic human rights and in some places women's rights are absolutely being eroded – I think here of the United States and Afghanistan – and I believe that we need a timely reminder that God is not a boy. Or a man or indeed, only our Father, though Tim preached about God our Father last week.

I often return, in my sermons, to two essential truths which are foundational for faith: *hesed*, or God's steadfast love, and grace. They are different but related. Today's Old Testament passage beautifully illustrates both these dynamic and eternal truths about the nature of God: "I will love you with eternal cords that cannot be broken." This is God's steadfast love, a gift of grace that we neither earn nor deserve.

The prophet Hosea depicts God and God's relationship with humans in a variety of ways, at first as a husband in a marriage, and with some dubious ideas about the husband's behaviour. But in this passage, the prophet uses a different image to communicate his message. He gives us an image in which God is very clearly depicted as a woman, as a mother.

It is true that both mothers and fathers are tender towards their children, and either parent can swoop their beloved child up in their arms. But it is also true that in the particularly patriarchal society of the 8th c bc, in Israel, it would almost always be the mother or at least the nursemaid, who holds the toddling child's hand, who nurses and feeds the baby. "It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms ... I bend down to them and fed them."

Here we see God who is loving, tender, and compassionate.

The word for compassion is one of the most clearly female aspects of God in Hosea and throughout the Hebrew bible. The Hebrew word *rakham* is an adjective meaning "compassionate," or "compassionate one." It is derived from the noun *rekhem*, meaning "womb." Right at the beginning of God's relationship with the people who would become Israel, when God reveals God's self to Moses [in Exodus 34:6-7], the very first word God uses to describe as a self-description is the Hebrew word *rakham*:

"Yahweh, Yahweh, **compassionate** and gracious, slow to anger, overflowing with **steadfast love** and faithfulness." This verse is quoted and reused over and over again throughout the Hebrew Bible.

The whole concept of God's compassion, key to who God is, throughout time, is rooted in the womb of God. God feels compassion for God's own created people, and is moved by the emotion of compassion into action. Compassion motivates forgiveness, and deliverance.

“For a brief moment I forsook you, but with great compassion I will gather you.” Isaiah 54 :7
“For if you return to the LORD, your brothers and your sons will find compassion before those who led them captive and will return to this land. For the LORD your God is gracious and compassionate, and will not turn his face away from you if you return to him. 2 Chronicles 30 : 9

And perhaps the most compassionate act of this ever-loving God is to become incarnate, to physically embody compassion in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is God’s deep compassion embodied as a human being.

The idea of God’s compassionate care, forgiveness, and rescue from suffering is seen clearly, repeatedly in the person of Jesus. He embraces the sick, cares for the outcast, and is deeply moved by human suffering.

Matthew writes, *“Jesus was going through all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness. Seeing the people, he felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd.” Mt 9: 35 - 36*

“And a leper came to Jesus, beseeching him and falling on his knees before him, and saying, “If you are willing, you can make me clean.” Moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, “I am willing; be cleansed.” Mk 1 : 40 - 41

As followers of Jesus who have received the compassion of God, we are called to live out the same kind of self-giving and others-oriented compassion.

So as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Colossians 3 :1 2 -1 3

So ... to circle back to the beginning... God is not a boy’s name. God is more than, bigger than, our language, more than we can imagine. But at the very core, as a starting place, first and foremost, God is compassion.

Let us pray.

May God, whose compassion knows no bounds, God in whose image we are wonderfully made, strengthen us in challenging times. May our Mother God hold us close by her bands of love, and may we show others what her love looks like in this fractured world. Amen.

Resources:

The Bible Project, Word study on Compassion

Abigail Dolan <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/article/priscilla-papers-academic-journal/imagining-feminine-god-gendered-imagery-bible>