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Hosea 1:1-11
Minor Leagues:
Insights from the Minor Prophets
True Love

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This morning we begin an adventure through some of the least-read books of the Bible: the Minor Prophets. And if the fact that they're the least read makes you want to tune out, thinking they must be least-read because they're not important, I would challenge that thinking and encourage you to consider this as an opportunity to grow and deepen your understanding of the Bible and the Christian faith.

Because the fact is, small things...things that we might consider "minor" can have major implications. We've seen this lately with Boeing and the angle of attack sensor on the 737 Max airplanes. It's a small part, but with big implications. Ten years ago I was at a ministry conference seminar being taught by a children's ministry director at a really large church, and she shared how one time she wanted to make the point with the kids (200 or more) that small things matter. To help illustrate that point she then proceeded to open a jar that was filled with all kinds of insects. Suddenly, as the insects came flying out, it was obvious that small things...minor things...can have a huge impact. I don't remember what else she shared about that, but I suspect it was the end of that morning's lesson.

The Minor Prophets are kind of like that. Not like annoying insects...but "like that" in the sense that they're small, but they're important. They matter. They can have an impact on our lives if we would take the time to read them and understand them. **The Minor Prophets comprise the last 12 books of the Old Testament, and they're called "minor" not because their themes are less impactful or less important, but simply because they're short and their content is quite centered on Israel and the context in which they wrote.** The longest of them is 14 chapters – that's Hosea, which we are in today. 14 chapters actually isn't terribly short in comparison to other Old Testament books. In fact two of the Major Prophets are even shorter, with Lamentations coming in at only 5 chapters long.

So if you're confused about which are the major and minor prophets and why

they're designated as such, then you're certainly not alone, and there's good reason to be a little uncertain, because there really isn't a clear line drawn in the sand that divides them up. **All the prophets – both major and minor – brought their messages to the nation of Israel over the course of about a 350-year span – from about 780 B.C. to about 430 B.C.** This was before, during, and just after Israel's succumbing to foreign powers.

So today we dive into the Minor Prophets, and each week my hope is to highlight the main point or two of the book for our own faith development, and also so you could read the book and have a framework in which to read and understand it. And we begin with the book of Hosea. Hosea was a prophet from the mid-700's B.C until about 720 B.C. At this time, not only was Israel under foreign rule, with all their leaders exiled to the capital of Assyria and then Babylon, also Israel was divided into two kingdoms – that happened in about 900 B.C. There's the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. As we've talked about before, this is kind of confusing because the two of them together are called Israel, as well.

Now a prophet's role was not, first and foremost, to predict future events. **In fact, just the opposite is true: most of what they said about the future was spoken as a warning, with the hope it *wouldn't* come true.** They would speak of dire consequences because of the lack of faithfulness of the people to whom they were speaking, with the hopes that the people would get back in line with God's will and God's ways...and therefore, the difficult future being spoken of would *not* come to fruition. This is one of the reasons people struggle to read the Old Testament prophets – both minor and major: there's a fair amount of future doom and gloom and judgment, and a lot of critique of the present, because these prophets are trying desperately to open the people's eyes to their waywardness from God's ways – both at the individual level and at the collective societal level as well.

It's very much like the tough love of a parent to a teenager son or daughter in a conversation of warning about the dangers and the consequences of failing in school or of getting involved with the wrong crowd of kids or falling into drug use or the enticing but relationship-ruining outcomes of pornography or of too much time spent on their screens. There's a warning from a parent to a

child about what could happen – especially if he or she is already on a track like that. And those conversations are had with the hope that the child will wake up to their reality, and see the future reality they’re headed into if they keep going in that direction...but hopefully that future actually doesn’t come to fruition because they make the changes needed.

Needless to say, these messages of warning about their sin and of calling people back to faith and living according to God’s Word did not always make the prophets very popular. They didn’t have the ladies lining up at their doors, they weren’t getting requests to speak at church conferences, their podcasts were not downloaded much, and they weren’t being invited as guests on late night television shows.

In fact, to make things worse, sometimes God asked them to live completely counter-culturally as a way of being a living sermon illustration to the people of how their relationship with God is going. Hosea is one of the best-known of those kinds of situations, where God tells Hosea to marry a prostitute.

This is as shocking to them then as it would be to us today. In fact: more so. I mean the headlines in the last number of years (goes back much further than recently, though there’s been a lot in the last 3 years or so) about men in particular – from Presidents to Football team owners to police officers to teachers to pastors – the headlines about them and their dalliances with women who aren’t their wives, and with women who are oftentimes in the sex industry...the fact that it has become common place in the last few years is almost unbelievable. In fact, and I kid you not: just ten seconds after I wrote that line, I had a teaser for a news article pop up on my phone that probably some of you got as well, that read, “This is what my life is like as the highest earning legal sex worker in the U.S.” I mean we’re just kind of conditioned to think this kind of thing being normal.

But not for them. For a prophet of God, identified by the community, called to shepherd them and lead them spiritually...even if they’re resistant to what he says...for *that* guy to marry a prostitute would be absolutely abhorrent. And even for us, though it does happen as people leave sex work to get on the straight and narrow life and then one day find someone to marry...even

for us, this idea is probably outside the boxes of our thinking. If your son or daughter were to tell you they were engaged to a person who had been in the sex industry – be it prostitution or pornography or whatever – I’m sure it would be shocking, at a minimum. But for them, it was a level or two beyond even that. It’s just unheard of and unfathomable. And he’s a prophet – a man of God! It’s shocking.

And yet this is exactly what God calls Hosea to do, and he marries this woman named Gomer. Yes, Gomer. I know, it’s on the list you’re considering for your daughter or hoping for your granddaughter, right? “Julie, Jennifer...and Gomer!” Why does God tell Hosea to do this? Because their relationship is going to be a living illustration of God’s love for His people. It’s not easy being a prophet of God. **And so here’s the deal: God’s people are to God as Gomer is to Hosea.** His people have been unfaithful, going after the gods of the cultures around them and who have overtaken their land. They have engaged in foreign worship practices both in worshipping false gods and bringing in foreign worship rituals (including sex). They have prostituted themselves before the God of the universe, the God who brought their ancestor out of Egypt, the God who brought them into the Promised Land, the God who has provided for them and formed them into a nation and adopted them as His people. They have, in a collective sense, turned their backs on Him and gone after others. And so Hosea marries Gomer, as a symbol of God’s love for Israel in spite of their own unfaithfulness.

And it’s not just their *marriage* that’s going to be an illustration of God’s love for them, but their kids end up getting dragged into it as well. These poor kids...I mean pastor’s kids are used to ending up as sermon illustrations occasionally and my kids are so good about allowing me to do that once in a while...but Hosea’s kids get it at a whole different level. Look at the last two: **One is named Lo-Ruhamah which means “not loved” and the other is named Lo-Ammi which means “not my people” (Hosea 1:6, 8).** Not names that mean “strong” or “faithful” or “joyful” or even “Go Huskies”...but “not loved” and “not my people.”

And it’s not that God is initiating this break in the relationship. He’s not declaring that this is the way it’s going to be because it’s His choosing –

though there will be consequences that He allows to happen. But it's a statement of who they have become and how they're living as *their* hearts and their lives and their worship has wandered away from God. **God is acknowledging the reality of their hearts toward Himself: They're not living as His beloved people and they're not living with Him as Lord of their lives.**

And then we see the book of Hosea peppered with these questions from God about what to do with His people. There's a struggle, in spite of the fact that God will ultimately continue to be faithful. So we read in Hosea 6:8, "What shall I do with you, O Ephraim?" (Ephraim is another name for God's people at this time, with roots going back to the tribe of Ephraim, Joseph's son/grandson of Jacob.) In 11:8, "How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?" And in 14:8, "O Ephraim, what have I to do with idols?"

And here's the thing: Israel is so entrapped in their sin and disobedience to God that they cannot get out of it themselves. They are, to quote John Calvin, "Totally depraved." Complete depravity, 100% off the rails, riding the crazy train and there is *no way* they can come back on their own. For example, Hosea says in 5:4-5,

**“Their deeds do not permit them
to return to their God.**

**A spirit of prostitution is in their heart;
they do not acknowledge the Lord.**

**Israel's arrogance testifies against them;
the Israelites, even Ephraim, stumble in their sin;
Judah also stumbles with them” (Hosea 5:4-5).**

And so while this is a word to the northern 10 tribes, the ultimate result is that the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom end up falling to Assyria and for a couple hundred years or so; they are under foreign rule, no longer their own nation, no longer a light shining on a hill for the God of the universe – though the light stopped shining long before being conquered.

Now, the good news that we see in Hosea is that it won't always be this way.

Even in chapter 1 we get a glimpse of the future and the reconciliation that will eventually happen between the two Kingdoms and between them and God, **“In the place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ they will be called ‘children of the living God’” (Hosea 1:9)**. We get more of these rays of sunshine through the dark clouds of doom and gloom throughout the book. In 13:14, we read, “I [God] will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death.” So there will be healing, but it’s going to come because God makes it happen.

And Hosea’s relationship with Gomer reflects this and anticipates it, as there is a rift between them and she leaves him for another man, but then in chapter 3 we read this: **The Lord said to me, “Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another man and is an adulteress. Love her as the Lord loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love the sacred raisin cakes.”** (Aren’t raisin cakes your downfall, too?) ☺

So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and about a homer and a lethek of barley. Then I told her, “You are to live with me many days; you must not be a prostitute or be intimate with any man, and I will behave the same way toward you” (Hosea 3:1-3). It’s a living illustration of God’s redeeming work to one day bring His people back to himself.

And so there are two things I want us to take away all of this: First, as shocking as it is that Hosea would love and marry Gomer and that God would use that as an analogy for Israel’s waywardness and His covenantal love for them: **As shocking and unexpected as that may be, it is just as shocking and unexpected that God would love you and me.** We are no different than Gomer or Israel. We might not think so. You and I might be tempted to fall for the idea that somehow we are good because we don’t commit certain sins that our society considers particularly evil or immoral...or maybe some of us have committed some of those...but our hearts are not pure. But society is not our judge. And God says that greed, lust, unethical behavior, selfishness, pride, deceitfulness, not caring for the poor,...the list goes on...God says those things are just as sinful as whatever the “big sins” may be. And the consequences of our sin are dire. It’d doom and gloom...but just as with Israel, God redeems us because of His love. And

so it is no less shocking that God loves us, and that he has ultimately paid the price for our redemption and reconciliation to himself through Jesus' death on the cross. Just as Hosea paid a price to get his wife back, God has paid the price for us through Jesus' life and his death on the cross...and he's proven the value and the certainty and the impact of that covenant with his resurrection from the grave. This is such good news! What you and I could never do for ourselves, God has taken care of because He loves us. You and I are loved by God, and He can bring about a future that's different than the course we are on when we try to do things on our own.

And then second, just real briefly, this is incredible inspiration and an amazing model of what it means to love the people in our lives – be that your spouse, kids, grandkids, someone you're renting a house with, your parents, or whoever it may be that you're called to love. **God has shown us such great love, how could we not turn around and love others with the same love?** And not just to love the people who are “Easy” to love...but the ones who don't deserve it, just as we don't deserve God's love. Who is a “Gomer” in your life that God is calling you to love? I bet we've each got people in our lives who have betrayed us or let us down or wronged us – maybe in a huge way. But they're not beyond the reach of God's love, and He just might reach them through you.

Let's share the love that God has for us by loving others as He does. He shows us what true love is here in Hosea and in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. So let's live into that love each and every day. Let's pray...Amen.