

“Really Rich”
Hosea 11:1-11; Colossians 3:1-11;
Luke 12:13-21

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I find Hosea a fascinating book. Last week, the reading from Hosea kind of reached out and slapped us. It was right there in our face—this strange story about Hosea marrying an unfaithful woman. I think today’s passage from Hosea is just as astounding, if not perhaps a little more subtle.

When I read it, I noticed what Hosea had to say about how God wanted to treat God’s people, how God had treated God’s people. There was that talk about God leaning down and helping Ephraim to walk, picking him up and holding him next to his cheek. It goes on to say, “...and I led with cords of kindness and bands of love.”

So often I get the question, what about this angry God of wrath in the Old Testament? I wish I had time to work through it all because I think that a passage like this shows God’s heart. To lead with cords of kindness and hold with bands of love.

As we think about whether our lives are any reflection of God’s, I wonder how often we try to lead with cords of kindness, how often we try to make our decisions based on whether it’s kind or not. I think about that idea of bands of love. Maybe you’ve experienced a situation where a group is held together by bands of love. I often see it in families and know it in my own, how somebody in the family is the one who holds us together by bands of love—father, mother, a sister, a brother. God is one who wants to hold us together with a band of love.

So what about this idea of wrath? God goes on in Hosea to say, “I’m no mere mortal. I don’t have to respond with wrath.” But I also think there is a point where God’s wrath is real. I looked up the word for wrath, and the thing that stood out to me was that the root of the word means nostril. Now that seems pretty weird to me. Then, face. What it made me think about is how in some cultures it’s rude to look directly at each other, because if you look directly at one another, if you’re face to face, there’s something wrong. It’s confrontational. Isn’t that what God’s wrath is about? It’s the idea that something is wrong and God has to address it face to face. It’s a confrontation. God wants to lead with cords of kindness and bands of love, but when things aren’t right...

What about the word wrath in the New Testament? We see it again in Colossians. It’s another interesting word, because it’s a word that means to swell or to teem, as in: “the ocean is teeming with fish.” The sense is that as God experiences things going wrong, opposition to it builds until there’s an expression that has to come forth.

I like this idea of God leading with cords of kindness and bands of love. In fact, I believe that’s God’s heart. So what goes wrong? I think that’s where Colossians begins to speak to me. It’s like when a preacher starts talking and all of a sudden it begins to seem like meddling, it starts to hit home. That’s the way it feels to me in Colossians as

he begins to talk about our change in our earthly nature. I think in our terms, it's our base nature, and how we deal with that. Why do we not simply allow cords of kindness and bands of love to be enough? I think Colossians is addressing that.

What does it describe as our earthly nature, or our base nature? The first one on the list is sexual immorality. Most of us can say, "That's not me." But as I looked at it, the word for immorality there is a word that means "to sell." What I think it's about is when we look at it, especially our sexual nature, simply in terms of a transaction. It's not about anything more than that transaction. It turns something that is supposed to be special and full of love into a transaction.

Next is impurity. The word for impurity is about having motives that are purely selfish. It's about caring only about self. The word for impurity is also the root word for pornography because it's about self, and it makes others into objects. So there's sexual immorality, there's impurity, and then there's lust.

Lust is really a word about using strong feelings or cravings and wanting to satisfy those without any concern about how it affects others. So it's simply without concern.

Then there are evil desires, and it's interesting that the word "desire" actually gets the word "evil" put in front of it. So it's not that desire (or passion as it is sometimes translated) is bad, but that evil desire or passion is bad. What that suggests to me is that it's when we act out our desires in a way that doesn't care about another's pain or suffering that our acting out our desire might cause.

The final one is greed. One way of thinking about greed is simply the need to acquire more and more. Except greed also has that sense of covetousness there. It's not just having more; it's having more than others, being better than others. And it's when that desire, that drive, becomes that which is what our lives are all about, that's what defines our lives, then it's idolatry. When we allow that greed to be that which defines our lives, we are no longer letting God define our lives. We have gotten rid of the sense that God is there, available, present, has will, has the right. It might be a time when we need to be confronted.

The interesting thing about the way God seems to work is that God sends one into our lives to show us love. Isn't that what Jesus is about in so many ways? God so loved the world that he sent his only Son. At the end of Romans 8, it says nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. God's way of dealing with us, God's heart, is cords of kindness and bands of love.

Jesus, again, as he's telling this story is asking, "Why are you asking me to be your judge and arbiter?" I think he knows why. The man wants Jesus to stand behind him. He wants the weight of the famous teacher to take back to his brother. It's a way of using a little extra force. Jesus goes to what's behind it. Jesus tells that parable of the rich man who acquires and acquires, whether it's corn or wishes. It's that idea that we

always acquire so that now we have it all, more than anyone else. Or if we don't, then we're always worried about having more.

Jesus goes on and says, "What happens at the end of that man's life? He loses it all. It's given to other people." Jesus is perhaps the first one to say, "You can't take it with you." And what I read into that is when we get to the end of our life, do we want to look back and see our life was a loss? It's all about our losses. I'll have to lose this and I'll have to lose that. Or is it about being full? I think things like kindness and love give us fullness and they take us into the fullness of God in a different way, and perhaps in an open-armed way rather than in that confrontational way.

He says you can't take it with you, it's all a loss. If you treasure it up here on earth, you don't get the real riches. Isn't that what Colossians and this passage from Jesus is all about? Where are we really rich? Is our life transformed? Are we changed? Can we see it in our behavior? Do we see those things like slander, anger, filthy language, rage—do we see those coming out of ourselves? Or do we see our own ability to reflect God's kindness, to show God's love, to be really rich in God?

Ikju started out by playing Amazing Grace. God's grace—now there's something that's really rich. Amen.