

In Conversation

[Hosea 1:2-10](#)

[Luke 11:9-13](#)

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July 24, 2017

The whole Bible is full of relationships. Our lives are full of relationships. And the quality of our relationships has a lot to do with how we talk to one another and what we say, in conversation.

The Book of Hosea describes two relationships: Hosea and his wife Gomer (bad name) and God and the people. The writer tells us a story because he wants us to see that Hosea relates to Gomer as God relates to us. It's an analogy.

So let's look how Hosea relates to Gomer. This story was written down after it happened; that's how storytelling works. The commentaries are varied. Some say, as the text reads, that God told Hosea to marry a prostitute. Other says that later, after Hosea married Gomer, she became a prostitute, and the story was then written down. I like the story the way Bishop John Shelby Spong tells it. Hosea is his favorite of all the prophets in the Bible, and Spong admits he takes some liberties with the story, as I have too.

Hosea met a young woman named Gomer with flashing eyes and beautiful curves. She danced and flirted in the village, and Hosea was smitten. He took her as his wife, and he was very proud of her loveliness. The people in the village wondered if the union would last. Gomer liked to go out, and she didn't want to leave the party and go home with Hosea in the evening when he always got tired. After some months, she refused to go home with him, but instead stayed out all night, and then months later gave birth to a child. God named the boy Jezreel, a name that reminded the people of a bloody battle. Hosea continued to love Gomer, even though she kept carousing. Gomer became pregnant again, and this time it was a girl. God named the girl "No Compassion" because God said she was destined to be a child one could never pity or feel sorry for. But Hosea still loved Gomer. When Gomer became pregnant a third time after a night away from home, God named the child "Not my People," because God did not approve of the mother's behavior and disowned her child completely. One night, Gomer did not return home to Hosea at all. Hosea searched for Gomer everywhere, even outside the gates where the prostitutes stayed. Hosea was desperate to find her. But she was nowhere to be found. Hosea was sick with sadness. Lonely years passed, and Hosea became old. He still loved Gomer and looked for her whenever he left his house. He figured that, by then, Gomer would be too old to find work as a prostitute. And so one day, Hosea went looking at the slave market where families bought slaves and gave them barely enough to eat, and made the slaves work long days at menial labor. That day at the slave market, a scrawny woman in rags was up for sale. She was old and dirty. Her hair was matted, her eyes were blood shot, and her face was lined with wrinkles. The people laughed at her and cried out: "Who would be foolish enough to pay anything for that one?" Hosea recognized his Gomer, and he stood up and silenced the crowd. With a clear voice, he offered 15 pieces of silver and bushels of

barley, and jugs of wine. All the people stared at Hosea in disbelief. They mocked him for his foolish purchase. But Hosea walked over to Gomer, gave up the silver and the goods, and took her hand. And then he walked her home, and there he told his servants that this woman was not a slave, but his wife, and he installed her back in the place of honor she had once occupied as the mistress of his household and the center of his affection (John Shelby Spong, *Re-Claiming the Bible for a Non-Religious World*, 126-129).

We don't know if Hosea spoke words of love to Gomer when he brought her home that day; I think he did. And there were probably some tears, of forgiveness and of joy. We know that Hosea loved Gomer unconditionally. He loved her beyond her unfaithfulness to him and beyond her promiscuity with others. He loved her even when no one else would have her. His love was without limit.

We can only guess that Hosea wrote about his love for Gomer because, out of his own life experience, he came to know that God's love is also unconditional and limitless. He knew that the people of Israel could not do anything bad enough to lose God's infinite affection.

This God of unconditional and limitless love is our God too. Though God might condemn our behavior, and even call us names, like "No Compassion" and "Not My People," in the end God takes us home by the hand.

This is Hosea's message to us. In conversation, he tells us that the number of people will be like the sand of the sea, and that every grain of sand, every person, is a child of the living God.

God's call to Hosea was "Go get married, and even if your wife becomes a prostitute, keep her and love her, as I love you. Do this and you will be able to teach the people that I will never give up on them." God's call on Hosea was not to be a preacher standing on a soap box, but living his ordinary life, and relating in love and forgiveness to his precious wife. Hosea is the prophet who used his own life to tell us the story of God's precious love for us.

In this way, we too can be prophets. People have asked our artist, Joanne, "How did you know what the prophets looked like?" And she would have to say, she didn't. And so she painted them as ordinary people, in fact, people in her own family. So, Amos is Harry's son, Scott; Hosea is her grandson, Mitchell; Isaiah is her husband, Harry; and Jeremiah is her son, Roger. The prophets are real people, and Hosea, more than any prophet, shares about his own marital relationship.

We cultivate our love in relationship by sticking together through thick and thin, and by talking our way through problems, through joys and through sorrows. Jim and I are in a couples group we call a "covenant group." It's a group of five couples who have been meeting together, for more than 18 years. We meet twice a month during the school year and have a weekend together once a year. We rotate the leadership, discussing issues of marriage and family, communication, and faith. We talk as a group, with planned questions, and, every time we meet, we write a letter to our spouse and then read it and talk about it. It's a way to structure our conversation to be about important matters and to

focus on our commitment to our partners. We find that we share many concerns with the other couples: worrying over our children's lives, watching our parents age and then die, finding meaning in career or in retirement. And we find commonality along gender lines often too: the women process things by talking, the men are more likely to be silent. The commitment to attend the group develops closeness in our marriages and also in our friendship with the other couples. Maybe we could start a couples' covenant group here, if you are interested. Relationships take some effort.

When we pray, we work on our relationship with God. The discipline of prayer helps us deal with issues that are otherwise hard to face. There is something about putting concerns into words that seems to help. When we share concerns in our prayer time at church, publicly, we know that others care too, and that also seems to make a difference.

In the book *The Color Purple*, Celie (in the movie, played by Whoopi Goldberg) writes letters to God. That's how the book starts: "Dear God." Celie tells God everything—all about her stepfather abusing her, about how he took her children away from her, and all about the husband she was forced to marry, and her sister leaving for Africa; and then, finally, something hopeful, she writes about a new relationship she develops with a woman named Shug. Shug helps Celie see that she is loved by God. She tells Celie, "Here's the thing...God is inside you and inside everybody else" (177). Celie writes letters to God, and this puts her in relationship to God, even before she really believes there is a God who cares. In conversation with God, and then in conversation with Shug, Celie comes into her own. She gains self-confidence and is able to become independent and self-assured. "Dear God," is not a bad way to start the conversation.

Two years ago I attended the wedding of the daughter of a close friend. My friend had shared with me the fact that her daughter's husband-to-be had been, in his words, "abandoned" by his father as a toddler. His mother was single for a long time and then remarried, and he had no contact with his birth father throughout his growing up. When the young couple became engaged, the husband-to-be tried to find his birth father. Finally, the week before the wedding, he located his father and went to meet him. The father and his new family cordially greeted the son, and the son invited his father and family to his wedding, and they accepted the invitation with some nervousness, but also with joy. The situation was a bit peculiar, because the father had been completely out of the picture for some 25 years. But when he showed up at the wedding, everyone was glad to see him. My friend, the mother of the bride, was a little unsure where to seat the father at the dinner party, so she seated him with me. It was my honor to talk with him and see him beam with great pride at his son's wedding.

You know the story of the Prodigal Son. Jesus may have told that parable because he had read the Prophet Hosea and believed that God's love is infinite. At the wedding I attended, there wasn't a "prodigal son." *The son* offered forgiveness to the "*prodigal father*." It is never too late to forgive and to love again. Perhaps there is a person in your life who comes to mind today, someone you need to forgive. Sometimes it just takes a conversation.

And Jesus reminds us that we don't have to wait for the other person to offer forgiveness. We can ask, and it shall be given. Sometimes it just takes a conversation.

Hosea learned that love and forgiveness work well, and he told the people that God is like the husband (or wife), or the father (or mother), or the son (or daughter) who always welcomes home the one who has gone astray. Thanks be to God for such love.