



“Rerouting: Faithfulness”

Matthew 5:8; Matthew 5:27-30; Hosea 2:13-20

Covenant . . . Faithfulness . . . Commitment

Choices. We could say that we are defined by the choices we make. Some are large and obviously important. But most are small and seemingly insignificant. But it is in the thousands of small choices we make that our character, our identity, is found. Do we strive to make choices that are Christlike or do we go our own way, doing whatever we think is right, day after day, year after year?

God created us in God’s image and gave us the responsibility to care for God’s creation, to make good God-filled choices. But a life filled with poor choices, those that pay God no mind, is a life that dissipates and disperses our soul. The ground we stand on becomes ever weaker and more fragile, moving underneath us as we chase one desire after another with little heed for how we were created to live. We trade heaven for hell. We find we’ve surrendered the kingdom of God for gold-plated baubles that tarnish and crumble and are surprised that our souls have shriveled up.

Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) is an excellent starting place to reimagine who we really are and what means to live in the kingdom of God/heaven now. And that is our goal in this rerouting series: to help us discover new ways to think about our lives and our place in God’s kingdom.

This week, we turn to covenant, commitment, and faithfulness. And, like the Bible, we will begin with marriage. One of the most important covenants any of us will ever make.

The marriage covenant

The union of two people, which we call marriage, is part of God’s created order. It is more than a convenience or a means of managing finances. Marriage is God’s gift to us. Marriage is God’s grace at work. It is important to see that marriage is not part of God’s Law brought to the Israelites by Moses. Marriage is a gift bound up with the very creation of humanity (see Genesis 2). It is a gift even to those who do not know God. So, we shouldn’t be surprised that a commandment to be faithful to one’s spouse should make the “top ten list” and is then taken up by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

There is no better way to grasp the importance that God places on faithfulness within the marriage covenant than to reflect on the story of the prophet Hosea. I’ve always found it to be one of the most shocking and moving stories in the Bible. How much does God value covenantal faithfulness? You’re about to see for yourself.

Hosea’s story

The opening verses of Hosea certainly don’t read like a love story. God tells Hosea this: “Go, marry a prostitute and have children of prostitution, for the people of the land commit great prostitution by deserting the LORD” (1:2). Can you imagine? Hosea is to go find an adulterous woman, marry her, and be a father to her children. Nothing about affection or courtship -- just go and do it.

The only portion of the book that deals with Hosea’s personal life is 1:2-9 and 3:1-5. Even here, the Hebrew is ambiguous and scholars are all the over the place on how best translate it. Is Gomer a prostitute as some translations have it, or is she “merely” promiscuous? Is she promiscuous before she marries Hosea or only after? But if we keep in mind that we are getting the story of two relationships in parallel, Hosea/Gomer and God/Israelites, then we can grasp the author’s point.

Hosea is to enter into a marriage covenant with a woman who is not faithful to the covenant, committing adultery with other men. Similarly, God has entered into a covenant with the Israelites and they have been unfaithful to that covenant by committing adultery with foreign gods. The way the adultery makes Hosea feel

is the way it makes God feel, but Hosea is to be faithful to Gomer as God is faithful to Israel. No wonder God takes our faithfulness in our marriages so seriously.

Covenant betrayal and a surprising response

If you've spent any time with the Old Testament, you know that the people's idolatry, the worshiping of foreign gods and idols, was a BIG problem during the long decline of Israel and Judah. In the biblical view, this idolatry, along with the people's abandonment of social justice, explains the decline of the Israelite kingdoms and their eventual destruction.

The story of God's response to this covenant betrayal is also told through the marriage of Hosea and Gomer. God's expected anger, judgment, and punishment await the adulterous Israel (2:1-13). Yet, that is not the end of the story. We are also told that God will win Israel back by showering her with tender affection (2:14-23): "Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her . . . On that day, says the Lord, you will call me 'My husband,' and no longer will you call me 'My Baal'."¹ The same emotional playing out of betrayal, forgiveness, and restoration is found in chapter 11: "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? . . . My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender, I will not execute my fierce anger . . . for I am God and no mortal, the Holy one in your midst, and I will not come in wrath." (11:8-9).

The over-arching Old Testament story is that of covenant betrayal, judgment, and restoration. Nearly every Old Testament prophet comes bearing a word from God about the coming destruction of unfaithful Israel, but also brings a word of hope and restoration. The people will have to bear the consequences of their betrayal, but God will one day restore them as his people, putting things right for them and for all of creation. It is this restoration (a.k.a. the coming of the kingdom of God) that the Jews are so anxiously awaiting in Jesus' day. It is the proclamation of God's kingdom, this restoration that occupied much of Jesus' ministry and was accomplished in his death.

We can see that this is somewhat like a marriage that has been rocked by unfaithfulness. It is hard and hurtful, marked by anger and despair. Yet, the couple makes it through, emerging on the other side with a marriage stronger than before. Is this really possible? With God, all things are possible!

True love

In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson writes, "Hosea is the prophet of love, but not love as we imagine or fantasize it. He was a parable of God's love for his people lived out as God revealed and enacted it — a lived parable. It is an astonishing story: a prophet commanded to marry a common whore and have children with her. It is an even more astonishing message: God loves us in just this way—goes after us at our worst, keeps after us until he gets us, and makes lovers of men and women who know nothing of real love. Once we absorb this story and the words that flow from it, we will know God far more accurately. And we will be well on our way to being cured of all the sentimentalized and neurotic distortions of love that incapacitate us from dealing with the God who loves us and loving the neighbors who don't love us."

Adultery and betrayal

Yep . . . a choice we make. Will we remain truly faithful to our spouses or not? We who are married said we would in the vows we took, but those vows are embodied in the countless choices we make every day. Adultery and betrayal lie at the end of a journey, not at the beginning.

Love is a choice. A choice. It is about what we do. True love is self-giving rather than self-seeking. Marriage is the loving union of two people. Through God's gift of sexual intimacy, two people bond as "one flesh" (Genesis 2:24), a bond so profound that it is a sign to their union with Christ, a bond so intimate that it is to be shared with no other person. God values marriage so highly that God is willing to use marriage as a metaphor for his own relationship with us. In a striking image, so far as God is concerned when we chase after false idols—and there are many even in our world—we are committing adultery, we are faithless rather than faithful.

¹ *Baal* was the chief god in the Canaanite pantheon and a main subject of the Israelites' idol worship.

The biblical perspective on love, marriage, and sex is that these gifts are all far more valuable than many of us want to acknowledge. These gifts from God are to be guarded and cherished, hence the teachings on sexual fidelity. As husbands and wives, our sexual energies – body, mind, and spirit – are to be poured into our marriage, toward our spouse. Jesus taught that adultery is more than the physical act (Matthew 5:27); when our sexual energies are directed outside the marriage, our marriage is diminished and our souls are dissipated.² Further, if we habitually turn our spouse into an object for the gratification of our own desire, we have embraced the vice of lust. God calls us to lives of faithfulness in all things, including utter faithfulness to our beloved.

Closing thoughts on relationships

Relationships. We all have them. They come in many shapes and sizes. We all have parents, many of us have brothers and sisters. Many of us marry, and some of us have children. We all have friends and hopefully at least a few very close ones. We have extended families and large, vast networks of acquaintances.

We use the catch-all word “relationships” to describe them all. A few of our relationships are deep, rich, and life-long; indeed, sociologists tell us that we are incapable of sustaining more than a handful of truly deep relationships. Others are thin and barely recognizable as relationships at all; I have 1000+ “friends” on Facebook, whatever that means.

The question for us is this: What do all the relationships in our lives have in common? We could talk about marriage or friendship or parenting, but think about all the relationships in your life. What could we say about all of them?

We ought not be surprised that our lives are a complex web of relationships. After all, we are made in the image of God, all of us, believer and non-believer alike. And this God, the creator of the cosmos, is inherently relational, three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, comprising a loving community for all eternity.

It is our claim that God is Triune (three persons/one God) that makes concrete John’s claim that “God is love” (1 John 4:8). Love requires an object – you love someone, someone loves you. Jesus reveals to us that God is love in God’s very being, God’s essence. God simply *is* a loving community of three; God simply *is* love.

So, we are to love. Love God and love neighbor, Jesus said, are the two most important of all God’s teachings. But how is this love manifested – across all our relationships?

Faithfulness

I believe that “faithfulness” pretty well sums it up. The Bible is one long story of God’s love manifested in his faithfulness. God makes promises and keep those promises – that is the essence of faithfulness.

As I’ve written about often, the word “faith” in Greek is *pistis*, and the best synonym for it is “trust.” Thus, faithfulness is grounded in the trust of the other person. It is to trust that the other person will keep their promises, will live up to their end of the bargain, will be true to a covenant made.

God is all these things. God is “faithful and just” (1 John 1:9). God made promises to Abraham and to his descendants, and kept those promises in God’s son, Jesus.

All promises are not the same. I entered into a marriage covenant with my wife, Angee. We are to be faithful to those promises and to one another. But I can also be faithful to someone in a business context. The question is the same: do I keep the promises I make? What a great thing it is to learn to never make promises you can’t keep. Why? Because breaking promises destroys trust and faithfulness. And trust is the seedbed of enduring relationships.

² This is why pornography poses such danger to marriages – it diverts our sexual energies outside our marriage and away from our spouse.