

The Parent Trap
Sermon on Hosea 11:1-11 Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, August 5, 2007

“The Parent Trap” probably conjures up for you images of the 1961 Disney hit film that starred Hayley Mills, or, for those of a slightly younger generation, the remake starring Lindsey Lohan, as twins separated at birth by their divorced parents. The girls happen to meet each other at summer camp, and then plot a way to get their parents back together. That film works because the twins’ parents were good parents—loving and kind—which cannot always be said for a certain male parent in the current Fox hit film, “The Simpsons.” I know that it will shock and scandalize some of my more conservative and evangelical-leaning friends to learn this, but I am a huge fan of “The Simpsons”, currently television’s longest-running situation comedy and now a feature-length movie.

When the show first appeared in the late 1980s and early 1990s, many conservative and evangelical (and perhaps even some liberal and mainline) Christians descried “The Simpsons” as immoral, sacrilegious, and damaging to traditional family values. It didn’t help that Homer, the *pater familias*, is a lazy, beer-guzzling, not-terribly-bright, self-centered person, or that his ten-year-old son, Bart, is a mischievous, borderline-delinquent, underachiever famous for saying, “Eat my shorts.” Bart can be counted on to do things that upset Homer, which invariably results in Homer strangling Bart within an inch of his life. But to the uninformed, it should be pointed out that the Simpsons are one of very few traditional nuclear families remaining on television, that Homer and Marge love each other very much, and that they truly care for their children, even if Homer cannot always remember his children’s names or how many of them there are. The Simpsons are frequently depicted going to church, praying (even if Bart’s prayers are to the effect: “Rub-a-dub-dub, thanks for the grub”), and struggling with moral issues.

Many have wondered what makes this animated cartoon so popular, and I think the answer lies, ironically, in the show's humanity, its willingness to deal with very real problems and situations, something we learned in English literature class to call 'verisimilitude'—the quality of appearing true to life or real. One way in which "The Simpsons" is particularly real concerns the issue of parenting. Like many of us, Homer and Marge struggle to be good parents, hewing to that fine line between too much praise and not enough, between setting high expectations and being realistic, between having dreams for a child's success and accepting them for who they are. Let's call it "the parent trap."

The parent trap is a struggle God knows something about. Recall that last week we saw that Jesus teaches us to address God as 'Father' because as the Son of God, he relates to God as Father. Because Jesus is also our brother (Heb. 2:11), we, too, can call God Father. We can have a personal relationship with the Father because of Jesus Christ. But recall as well that we are not the first to know God as Father. God's people Israel also called God Father—albeit in a corporate or collective sense, and chapter 11 of the book of the prophet Hosea is a "moving and eloquent"¹ portrayal of God as a loving parent whom we can see as both father and mother.

Reading the eleventh chapter of Hosea is like watching a home movie of God with God's young child, Israel, who is also called Ephraim. As the movie begins, we hear God's voice remembering how the relationship with Israel began: "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son" (Hos. 11:1). This reflects a major theme that runs throughout the Old Testament: the image of the people of Israel as an orphaned child, a youth without parents, enslaved in the land of Egypt. God loved this child Israel, and because God loved Israel, God delivered his people from their slavery. In this exodus, God accomplished two things: First, God

¹ Bruce C. Birch, *Hosea, Joel, and Amos*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997) 97.

liberated Israel from slavery, and second, in liberating the people of Israel, God incorporated them into his own family, adopting them as God's own children. Israel becomes God's adopted son.

But if you know the story of the Old Testament, you know that Israel proved to be a rebellious child. It was shortly after they had been delivered from their bondage that the people began to complain about the lack of meat and bread. They complained about the journey and about their leaders. They even complained about God, how it was hard to see him or to know what he wanted. So when Moses had gone away on one of his many trips to visit with God, the Israelites set up a golden calf and began to worship it. And that was only the beginning of centuries of apostasy and idolatry on Israel's part, for the people were always being led astray to worship foreign—and false—gods, not the God of Israel who had led them in love out of Egypt.

It is an age-old story, as old as humanity itself: the struggle between parents and their children—parents asking for loyalty and obedience, children seeking to go their own way and live life on their own terms, not those of their parents. It is a struggle attended with heartbreak and longing, and interludes of grace. It is a struggle God knows something about. “The more I called them,” God says of his children the Israelites, “the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols” (11:2). How many parents know this only too well: They reach out to their increasingly distant children, trying to bring them back to the ways of family and home, only to have their efforts rebuffed. So it is with God, says Bruce Birch: “The more God desired [a] relationship as parent to child, the more Israel rejected God in favor of idolatry”, leading to a “continuing process of estrangement.”²

Like any parent, God goes through a period of self-searching, asking what he did wrong, how he could have pushed his child away. “[I]t was I who taught Ephraim to walk,” says God,

² Ibid., 99.

“I took them up in my arms; ... I led them with cords of kindness, with bonds of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them” (11:3-4). Elizabeth Achtemeier paints a beautiful picture of “God the Father bending down to offer a supporting finger to the unsteady, toddling infant Israel; letting him fall at times; encouraging his little steps; praising him when he does well; and then sweeping him up in his arms when he starts to cry (v. 3), wiping away his tears, and comforting him against his cheek (v. 4 NRSV).”³

But Israel, the ungrateful, disobedient, rebellious child turns away, worshiping other gods instead of the God who would be a Father. Indeed, God laments his people’s stubborn determination not to have him for their God or Father, saying, “My people are bent on turning away from me” (11:7a). What, then, is a loving parent to do? To abandon the child to his own ways, to let him “reap the whirlwind” (8:7)? To punish the child with a lesson he would never forget? The Law of Moses⁴ allowed the parents of a rebellious son to condemn him before the elders of their city, whereupon that son would be stoned to death. That kind of violent punishment is clearly on God’s mind: Because Israel has “refused to return” to God, the “sword rages in their cities,” devouring priest and people “because of their schemes” to turn away from God. It is, as Jonathan Edwards warned, a terrible thing to be sinners in the hands of an angry God, and now sinful, rebellious, disobedient Israel faces the wrath of God at the hand of a foreign army.

“[W]hen God contemplates the destruction and captivity of his people Israel,” however, “he cannot stand the sight.”⁵ Consider it a parent trap: God is caught between the demand for justice, the need to punish his child for willful disobedience and a fathomlessly deep love for

³ Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Preaching from the Minor Prophets: Texts and Sermon Suggestions* (Grand Rapids, Mich. and Cambridge, U.K.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998) 25.

⁴ Deuteronomy 21:18-21.

⁵ Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Minor Prophets I*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996) 94.

Israel, the son of God's own election and salvation. We catch a glimpse into the heart and mind of the deity as God asks, "How can I give you up, Ephraim? / How can I hand you over, O Israel? / How can I make you like Admah? / How can I treat you like Zeboiim?" (11:8). When faced with the prospect of handing over his beloved son for certain and complete destruction, God is unable to give up on this unruly child. God's heart is tied to this headstrong and recalcitrant child with "cords of kindness" and "bonds of love." No amount of faithlessness, no amount of insubordination, no amount of sheer fractiousness can drive God away, can make God end the relationship, can overcome or change God's love for his child.

And that is because God is "God and no mortal, / the Holy One in your midst" (11:9). To say that God is not mortal and that he is holy is to remind us that God is wholly Other—totally and qualitatively different—than we are. Even though God faces the same trials as human parents of all-too-human children, God "retains sovereign freedom and chooses to use that freedom for mercy."⁶ This is the parent trap: God could choose vengeance and justice and wrath in response to his people's continued idolatry and infidelity, and God would be justified in his sentence. But the heart of God recoils from the thought that anything would separate God from God's children, for the very nature of God is love. As the Apostle Paul affirms, neither life nor death, neither angels nor rulers, neither things present nor things to come, neither height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from God's love in Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:38-39). Though we may be wayward children, we are loved, and God reaches out to us, to hold us in his arms yet again, to be with us and have us as his own. It is a wonderful thing to be sinners in the hands of a righteous God, a God who reaches out to us with patience and kindness and mercy and love.

⁶ Birch, 100.