

*Love Complicates Things*  
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The Lord said to me, “Go, love a woman who has a lover and is an adulteress, just as the Lord loves the people of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love raisin cakes.”

Hosea 3: 1

My people consult a piece of wood, and their divining rod gives them oracles. For a spirit of whoredom has led them astray, and they have played the whore, forsaking their God.

Hosea 4: 12

God’s wife is a whore. God loves a woman and takes her as his wife. But God’s wife sleeps with other men for money and favors.

God’s wife is a whore. Not because she’s destitute and desperate. Not out of economic necessity, because she must survive in this world and has nothing to sell but her body. No, God provides for her very well.

God’s wife is a whore because she wants to be a whore. She wants to sleep with other men. Her husband, as good as he is to her, is not enough for her.

Now every time God’s wife sleeps with another man, she commits adultery against him. And because she sleeps with other men a lot, she’s a serial adulteress.

Adultery is a serious violation of God’s Law. It’s one of the Ten Commandments: “You shall not commit adultery.” Clearly spelled out, right there between “you shall not murder” and “you shall not steal.”

In fact, adultery is so evil, it’s punishable by death. God’s Law stipulates, “If a man is caught lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman as well as the woman. So shall you purge the evil from Israel...you shall bring both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death.” (Deut 22: 22).

Recall in John’s Gospel the crowd pressing in around a woman, about to stone her to death for committing adultery. Where’s the guilty man in this case? We don’t know. But the woman’s there, and the crowd’s ready to kill her because that’s the Law.

God’s wife has committed adultery against him. Repeatedly. Openly. Wantonly.

What’s God to do?

Carry out the punishment God’s own Law spells out? Kill her? Kill his wife?

If God is very legalistic, if God is beside himself with anger, or if God doesn’t love his wife any more, God may very well kill his wife. It may be very cut and dry. A quick decision.

But what if God still loves his wife? Even if God is legalistic, even if God is beside

himself with anger, what if God loves his wife?

What then? What's God to do?

Not so cut and dry. Not such a quick decision.

Love complicates things.

In the book of Hosea, "God's wife"—"the whore"—is God's people, the people of Israel.

What's God to do with his people?

His people are guilty of whoredom. His people are sleeping with other gods.

He liberated them from slavery, led them through the wilderness, and established them in a land he promised them. And yet, he's not enough for them.

His people are sleeping with other gods. A lot.

His people are committing adultery against him. A lot.

His people are doing what's evil, what's punishable by death. A lot.

What's God to do?

Carry out the punishment stipulated in God's own Law? Kill them? Kill his people?

If God is very legalistic, if God is beside himself with anger, or if God doesn't love his people anymore, God may very well kill them.

But what if God still loves his people? Even if God is legalistic, even if God is beside himself with anger, what if God love his people?

What then? What's God to do?

Love complicates things.

This complicated tension runs throughout the book of Hosea. The people of Israel have committed countless evil acts against God, acts for which God's own Law commands the death penalty. Will God carry out the death penalty against his people? Or will God's love for his people complicate matters, make things less cut and dry, and open some space for mercy and a reprieve?

Those who believe the Old Testament is about Law, judgement and punishment, while the New Testament is about love, mercy and forgiveness, are missing the boat I think. The book of Hosea reveals how faithful Jews were wrestling with the tension between Law and love, judgment and mercy, punishment and reprieve. And they were wrestling deeply with these tensions centuries before Jesus, a Jew, offered his interpretation.

The book of Hosea doesn't resolve these tensions. Hosea prophesies the destruction of Israel as God's punishment, and he proclaims God's steadfast love for his people, even in the face of their evil acts of betrayal.

The final word at the end of Hosea is a call to repentance and an assurance of God's forgiveness. If the people stop committing evil acts, and if they sincerely apologize for the ones they've already committed, God will forgive them, and all will be well. But nothing we've read up to that point in Hosea leads us to believe that God's people will repent. That's just not going to happen. So the adultery continues, and the tension remains.

To this day it remains.

It's the tension between law and love, judgment and mercy, punishment and reprieve.

We all have sets of rules by which we live. Commandments we obey. A code that defines what's right and wrong, good and bad, helpful and harmful, normal and abnormal.

We pass judgement on people. On how closely they follow the rules. On whether they obey or violate the commandments. Conform to, or deviate from, the code.

And we have ways of punishing people when we find them guilty. All kinds of ingenious ways of making others pay, of restoring the scales of justice, of venting anger and resentment.

Without love, this is all very cut and dry. A quick decision. This person violated this rule, commandment or code. This is the punishment. Carry it out, now.

But love complicates things. Love is merciful. Love desires to offer a reprieve, to give another chance. With love, things become less cut and dry. Decisions not so quick.

As human beings, we're not yet capable of living together with no rules, no laws, no commandments, no codes. We need something authoritative that says murder, adultery, stealing...you can't do these things. And there must be consequences for violating these rules, laws, commandments and codes. People just can't get away with murder, not even people we love.

But where, and how, does love, mercy and a second chance enter the picture?

In our personal lives, when we find people guilty of violating our personal code and we want to punish them, perhaps with sarcasm or the silent treatment. Or in our communal and institutional lives, when someone violates a law, and a prison term is the consequence. Where, and how, does love, mercy and a second chance enter the picture?

It's not an easy question to answer. And each set of circumstances may call for a different answer.

Love complicates things.

Throughout the entire Biblical drama, Old Testament and New, God's love for God's people complicates things. Throughout the entire drama of our own lives, love complicates things. Because we love, because we open our hearts to other people, life's not so cut and dry.

Thank God for love.

Thank God for complicated lives.