

Let Every Soul Be Jesus' Guest  
Hosea 11:1-11; Luke 15:1-2

The book of Hosea is a meditation on the love of God for God's people. But this is no typical love story. In this story, God commands that a prophet marry a prostitute and have children with her. The first three chapters describe the relationship between Hosea and his wife, Gomer, which is a parable for the relationship between God and Israel. It is a long and rocky relationship, with anger, bitterness, and self-destruction. It is a miracle that the relationship endures; but relationships do endure. This is the story of a love that will not let us go.

In the eleventh chapter, the perspective shifts slightly from husband and wife to parent and child. Israel was adopted out of Egypt to be the Lord's child, Ephraim. We might think that Israel would display gratitude for this act of rescue and salvation; but no, Israel calls upon other gods, bows to idols, and gives credit to other benefactors.

In the parable, God is somewhat bewildered. "*Who taught Ephraim to walk?*" God asks. "*I did. I took them in my arms; I healed them; I was compassionate; I bent down to them; I fed them. Not those others. Me*" (see vv. 1-4).

You can hear the resentment and the hurt; can't you? Ephraim represents the entire northern kingdom of Israel, God's own people. "*They are determined to run away from me,*" God says, "*backsliders. They've gone to the far country, Assyria, they have returned to Egypt where they were slaves.*" We can hear, in the parent's voice, if we listen closely, something deeper: "*Why would they do this to me?*"

If you were this parent, what would you do? The story of Hosea is a parable of God's relationship with God's people, and therefore, with us. Here are the words from the mouth of this bewildered parent: "*How can I give you up, O Ephraim! How can I hand you over, O Israel! How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim [cities that shared the same fate as Sodom and Gomorrah]?*" (v. 8)?

Notice what has happened: The child turns away from the parent, but the parent turns toward the child. God turns toward us: "*My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim, for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath*" (vv. 8-9).

Keep this parable in mind as you consider a simple idea in the New Testament. Jesus

is mixing with the people, all kinds of people, and the scribes and Pharisees are murmuring: *“He welcomes sinners and eats with them”* (St. Luke 15:2).

These two passages of Scripture lead us into the very heart of God, into the nature of salvation and the experience of grace. God’s compassion grows as that of a loving parent. Jesus welcomes sinners.

The sign of God’s compassion is that the relationship endures. The sign of Jesus’ reception of sinners is that he eats with them. The sign of the relationship is the meal. A *sacrament*, defined in the early church, is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. How do we know that we are in a relationship? We come to this meal, we eat together, and it is grace.

Jesus’ life and ministry was a gift of grace; we see this throughout the Gospels. Jesus takes the loaves and the fish and feeds the multitudes. He tells a story about a dinner party and those who respond to the invitation and those who do not. In his life and relationships, Jesus was always reaching out to others.

At times some complained about this. The cultural idea was that the righteous associated with the righteous; the clean ate with those who were clean and did not associate with those who were unclean. But a physician goes to the sick, Jesus reminded them. The Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost.

The core question is simple: how can a holy God be in relationship with an unholy people? How can Jesus (God forbid) eat with sinners? From a human point of view, it makes no sense. From a human point of view, there can be no relationship. But the prophet reminds us that God is God and not human; God promises not to destroy God’s people in anger. (See Hosea 11:9). Holiness does not destroy sin; through compassion, it saves. Perfection does not destroy imperfection; through love, it heals.

I think God must wonder, *“How do I get this message across to my people, that I love them, that I want this relationship to endure, that I am the One who gave them life—not those other gods—that I want the best for them?”*

And God’s answer comes to us through the life of Jesus: *“We will sit down together at a meal. My son, Jesus, will preside. Jesus will eat not just with the worthy people but with the unworthy, not only with the righteous but with sinners, not only with the faithful but with the unfaithful, not only with the older brother who has done everything right, but with the prodigal son who has done everything wrong”* (see Luke 15:11-32).

God seems to be saying, in the words of one of the faithful servants of God, Charles Wesley, who would come along much later:

*“Come, sinners to the gospel feast, let every soul be Jesus’ guest, Ye need not one be left behind, for God hath bid all humankind. (“Come, Sinners, to the Gospel Feast,” stanza. 1)*

Come, sinners to the gospel feast. Sinners—that’s all of us. Amen