

## Gomer

*Hosea 1:2-10*

July 25, 2010

First & Central Presbyterian Church

Wilmington, Delaware

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'Tis the season at First & Central! Between now and the end of October, we'll have 7 weddings and that will make a total of 10 for this wedding season. Now in my 8<sup>th</sup> year here I've come to expect the surge in matrimony as any other liturgical time. Yet unlike Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, or Easter - I am torn as to the legitimacy of the church's involvement.

Now...a quick and heart-felt caveat: Anyone sitting in these pews who has been or will be married at First & Central must completely exempt themselves from these next comments! Also, by way of definition - my use of "marriage" is in a Massachusetts way!

Here's the dilemma:

If we, who labor in the church, believe marriage to be a sacred institution in which two people express the essence of their love and commitment to one another, and do that before God and in the company of their families and the congregation, which is the case for the majority of the couples, then what do we say to those who seek out this sanctuary primarily for its potential as a photo-op?

Our guidelines are such that at a minimum, one half of the couple must self-profess to be "Christian" - with no rigid, doctrinal standard to which one must adhere. Even in this post-Christendom age, that's not a stretch for most couples.

Our guidelines also stipulate that a minister of this congregation must preside over all ceremonies and has the authority to invite other clergy to participate as well. This has paved the way for a large number of Protestant/Catholic ceremonies as well as a few Christian/Jewish ones. Many of those hybrids have been among the most meaningful if only because one person's religious convictions were strong enough to warrant the involvement of clergy persons connected to their background.

Yet in many cases, as the couple and I meet for the first time and I gather some introductory information, I simply ask, "tell me about your faith background."

Really - for any number of them, they'd rather discuss their sex lives or provide confidential financial statements than talk about anything related to religion.

It's at this point that I meet a plethora of Roman Catholics or Protestants who have not darkened the door of a church since they were Confirmed, many of whom stumble and stutter through a litany of reasons why church hasn't mattered for the last decade of their lives but now, with the hope and vision of being bedecked in a designer wedding gown, escorted by a proud, yet tearful father in a rented tuxedos, towed to an anxious, perhaps slightly hungover groom, flanked by bleary groomsmen on one side and bridesmaids wearing dresses they hope to never see again on the other - church has renewed importance.

Like those in a job interview they are convinced that their dream wedding hangs in the balance of crafting the “right” answer to my question about their faith practices. Really - all I want to know is one, will they be honest with me, and two, what might their expectations be for their ceremony.

The default, and surely perceived “safe” answer, is to talk about all of the “dues paying” involvement of one's early years and conclude with the lofty, even introspective, “while I'm not actually a member of any church, I still consider myself to be very spiritual.”

I find that arrogant and if I thought they really understood what they were saying, I'd even be offended.

In some respect, what I'm being told in that answer is they left behind the folly of the church and instead have progressed to a deeper spiritual level - one that doesn't require the trappings of “organized” religion. They've, in essence, adopted that attitude that religion really is the “opiate of the masses” and they choose not be herded in that corrupt system - until of course, that spiritually bankrupt system can provide them with a perfect white marble venue 30 yards from the Gold Ballroom!

In the interest of full-disclosure, I hasten to say that we charge a hefty sum for ceremonies at First & Central, the fees for which have quadrupled in 7 years. As a surprise to no one, our little Wedding Chapel appears to be a recession-proof industry!

Couples being interviewed for a wedding or commitment ceremony aren't the only ones hanging their hats on the “spiritual” peg - we hear it all the time. “This is the great faith of our time—faith as a vague feeling of something or other, out there, or within, something that gives us a sort of warm feeling about some indescribable, indefinable, something.”

It could be that we'd rather not face an involved, even interventionist God so we made God into an abstraction, a concept who is removed from the world and is less threatening to our desire to run the place how we damn well please.

Well, this Sunday the prophet Hosea introduces us to a very different sort of God. Hosea intrudes with a pushy, challenging, perhaps even offensive metaphor for our relationship to God: we stand before God as an adulterous spouse [or partner] stands before a long-suffering, loving, faithful [partner]. What we might call [“not being religious—but spiritual”] the book of Hosea indelicately names “harlotry.” Although we might like to keep our conversations with God cool, calm, and polite, in today's [reading] the emotional temperature is cranked up; there is heated, passionate, anguished name-calling, shouts and cries, and angry pleading.

This God is not ethereal or distant. This God is not a warm feeling. This God is not impersonal or unapproachable. This God is in your face, calling you out, ready to commit a crime of passion.

Yes - the language is harsh - marry a whore, a prostitute, a “woman of whoredom.” People in polite company don't use words like that! Yes - the imagery is patriarchal, sexist, and androcentric - how would we hear the story if the prophet was a woman and her male partner was sleeping around? “Gigolo” doesn't have quite the same sting as “whore”.

Yes - we can imagine ourselves the wronged spouse, what it might feel like to be the "good wife", the one who stands next to the philandering husband at the news conference wherein dalliances are aired while she's the stoic ornament, emotionally drained, yet ever steadfast and faithful. We've seen this so often it's now the basis of a television series. A commentator once said that if he was unfaithful to his wife she wouldn't be standing *next* to him, she'd be standing *over* him asking "how do you reload this thing?"

Really - that's more the adulterer's just desserts. Dump the scoundrel, get as much as you can, and never look back. Sandra Bullock dropped Jesse James like a hot rock, and Mark Sanford was shown the door as soon as he got back from "hiking the Appalachian Trail."

If you're like me - there's a smirk of justice that comes with the news. Oh yes, a good "Christian attitude" would be more generous and clearly a posture of forgiveness and redemption is more in keeping with our Confessions, but regardless, few things are more satisfying than a scumbag getting whacked.

Satisfying perhaps until we realize those are us.

We might naturally picture ourselves the long-suffering spouse or partner of the story - but truth be told - our name is "Gomer".

God told Hosea to "take for [himself] a wife of whoredom" and Hosea chose Gomer and they immediately started a family.

To put this in perspective, Hosea was working in the northern section of the country during a time of relative calm and prosperity that eventually ended with the Assyrians overtaking the region.

During this time Hosea confronted two scourges: one, the proliferation of a cult of sexualized fertility worship; and two, reckless political posturing and scheming, particularly in the capital city of Samaria.

Northern Israel had migrated from a society based in kinship and community toward one with centrally concentrated wealth and power. This led to self-absorption and numbing riches. Coupled with that movement was the dilution and corruption of traditional worship which was now administered by court-appointed priests--government controlled religion with no dissension or prophetic voice.

The people were moving away from God and toward their own indulgences and pleasures - "What happens in Samaria stays in Samaria!" Wandering, lustful, hedonistic, amoral philandering and no one looked back from the Appalachian Trail.

No one except Hosea, who, with God's prodding, lived in real terms the relationship God was subjected to by the people Israel.

They were a people of whoredom who trounced the covenant with drunken glee, who treated sacred space like the Grotto at the Playboy Mansion, who flaunted any hint of fidelity with callous disregard.

Hosea married such a person and their offspring bore the monikers of God's disposition:

"Jezreel", named for a place of slaughter and anarchy, the equivalent of naming your firstborn "Auschwitz;" "Lo-ruhamah", not-pitied - name your first daughter "Lizzie Borden;" and the third, "Lo-ammi", not my people - so your youngest you'd baptize "Marie Antoinette."

Gomer, despite her new maternal status, refused to give up her former ways. She flaunted her exploits, wandered to and fro the home fires, tormenting Hosea with her flagrant infidelity. Hosea responded with anger and outrage—at times violent and always tumultuous—yet he never abandoned despite an abundance of cause.

Our name is Gomer. Hosea compares our relationship with God to a messed-up marriage in which a sexually promiscuous, serially unfaithful spouse is repeatedly forgiven, taken back, excused, and loved. Hosea's tortured experience provided a living, symbolic demonstration of God's heartbreak over the people's love affair with foreign deities. It's a scandalous idea, not often expressed in polite, proper religious circles. It's clearly not very "spiritual!"

I don't know how the vast majority of the ceremonies that I've performed have turned out. My hope and prayer is that they grew and matured into relationships of love, compassion, and mutual independence. Statistically, however, I know that some have been difficult, some have ended in divorce. My guess is that none, however, suffered the repeated trauma of Hosea and Gomer—a relationship that withstood devastation, repeated adultery, and nearly constant heartache.

Yet - this is a story, ultimately, of hope.

Hosea does not forsake Gomer, God does not give up on us. We may flaunt our attractions, we may worship at the altar of materialism, we may be fickle in our allegiance, we may even turn away from God with a flimsy grasp of the "spiritual" casting aside the obligation, demands, and unpleasantness of "organized religion" - but God does not give up on us.

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols.

Yet it was I who taught them to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them.

How can I give you up? 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; I will not again destroy; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.

Our name is Gomer.

Thanks be to God. Amen!