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The Cords of Love

 “The ties that bind” is a familiar phrase, often referring to the shared values and beliefs that connect a group of people. Of course, these are not literal ties, ropes or cords that bind people together. Binding people with rope or cords carries quite a different connotation! But perhaps you have heard a debate that parents of young children are sometimes faced with. Is it okay to put young children in a harness and leash, in effect “binding” them to an adult or caregiver? If you search online, you can find both “yes” and “no” answers and reasons for each. As a single young adult, I thought it was an awful thing to do. It seemed to me too much like “walking a dog.” Yet, only a few years later, as the parent of an active boy only 19 months old, my perspective changed. We were traveling to Illinois to attend Alan’s brother’s wedding. Our itinerary took us through busy airports with long layovers. I was thankful for the leash which allowed our young son freedom to move and yet kept him safely attached to a parent. The leash became a “cord of love” which helped keep our young son safe.

 In our text today, the prophet Hosea pictures Yahweh as a parent gently caring for a young child. Yahweh says, “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son…it was I who taught Ephraim to walk. I took them up in my arms…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.”

 Allen Guenther in the Believer’s Commentary says that God is pictured here as “the child’s mother, who carries the infant Israel strapped to her back or hip in a carrying pouch made of cords ,,,cords of human kindness …bands of love. “ He says, “Her touch is warm and affectionate, like those who lift infants to their cheeks. The divine Mother holds infant Israel in her lap and bends over to nurse the child….”

 It is a comforting metaphor, a beautiful picture of the God who loves us. It is a view of God that we can be comfortable with. We trust God; we rely on God; we come to God as our Parent, our Creator, our good Shepherd, our friend; we come to God as the One who loves us and cares for us.

 It is not difficult to go from that understanding of God to the belief that God is on our side, that our way of life is God’s way, that our values are God’s values, that our place in the world is especially blessed by God. That is the myth of Christian nationalism, and it is a trap. It treats God like a mascot, or an idol made in our own image. Perhaps it is also the trap that Israel, as God’s chosen people, fell into in Hosea’s day.

 The prophet Hosea lived in the eighth century B.C.E. He was likely a contemporary of Micah, Isaiah and Amos. He is believed to be a prophet from the Northern Kingdom of Israel, speaking God’s word to a rebellious people shortly before the fall of the kingdom to Assyria. Hosea pronounced God’s condemnation of Israel for their rebellious worship of other gods, their wicked ways, and the ways the wealthy used their power and wealth to oppress the poor and vulnerable in their society.

 In Hosea 11 it is God speaking. “The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols….I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them.” Yahweh’s relationship to Israel was through covenant. God had declared, “I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be their slaves no more; I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect.” (Lev. 26:12-13) Yet time after time, Israel broke covenant with God, choosing to follow the ways of their neighbors who did not know Yahweh.

 In Israel the legal punishment for a rebellious son was to be stoned to death; Deuteronomy 21:18 to 21 says, “If someone has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father and mother, who does not heed them when they discipline him, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his town at the gate of that place. They shall say to the elders of his town, ‘This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard.’ Then all the men of the town shall stone him to death. So, you shall purge the evil from your midst; and all Israel will hear and be afraid.”

 During this sermon series we have been looking at the fruits of the Spirit. Today we are thinking about gentleness. So what do we do with wrath or punishment on one hand and gentleness on the other? I chose the passage in Hosea 11 for today because it shows us God’s heart., God’s dilemma. Israel’s rebellion required judgement; according to the Torah, it required death. Their rebellious actions had consequences. Hosea writes, “They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me. The sword rages in their cities, it consumes their oracle priests, and devours because of their schemes. My people are bent on turning away from me. To the Most High they call, but he does not raise them up at all.” God refuses to answer.

 Bernard Anderson was a United Methodist pastor and Old Testament scholar. He wrote this about the eighth century prophets, including Hosea: “The prophets declared that people could not know God as a ‘friend’ until they first knew him as an ‘enemy.’….The radically new message of the eighth century prophets was that divine election does not exclude divine rejection….To live in the presence of Yahweh, the Holy One, is to experience his inescapable judgment which searches the innermost hearts and exposes the subtlest forms of social oppression.”

 Choices have consequences. Bad choices have bad consequences. In God’s presence we are exposed for who we truly are, not just as individuals but as communities of people. According to Hosea, eighth century Israel’s choices are worthy of destruction, of death. And yet….And yet….what parent doesn’t know the agony of a child’s wrong choices that bring hard circumstances?

 Hosea 11 shows us God’s pathos, God’s passion, God’s breaking heart. For in verses 8 and following we read, “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 Zeboim?” (These were cities that burned with Sodom and Gomorrah). The lament continues, “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.” Although the people, the community of Israel is worthy of death according to Torah, Yahweh chooses to forgive.

 Hosea uses another metaphor in the following verses. God is like a lioness calling her children home with a roar. “They shall go after the Lord, who roars like a lion; when he roars his children shall come trembling from the west. They shall come trembling like birds from Egypt, and like doves from the land of Assyria; and I will return them to their homes, says the Lord.”

 When I read Hosea 11, I see a God who is not consumed by wrath or righteous anger, but whose heart breaks when Yahweh’s children chose destruction instead of life. I see a God who prefers to discipline gently, but who allows children to make choices and suffer the consequences of those choices. I see a God who cares deeply for people, a God who suffers with them and longs to welcome them back and comfort them. I see a God who cares deeply about what happens in this world, even as she allows us to make decisions that affect all who live on this world.

 If that is the kind of God we follow, then what about us? The list of Bible passages with the word “gentle” or variations thereof is not particularly long. Many of those passages tell us how to deal with the transgressions of others. Galatians 6:1-5 is one of those passages. Paul writes, “My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ.”

 God’s way is not to ignore transgression, there are consequences. But God is also compassionate and forgiving. God’s Spirit calls us to recognize our own weaknesses and failures, not just our successes or position or status. God’s Spirit calls us to see ourselves as we truly are, wayward and rebellious, broken and forgiven, restored and loved, God’s beloved children. Then,,,then with humility, with empathy, with gentleness, we can reach out to those who are doing wrong, to those we disagree with, to those in trouble…not to punish or judge but to walk alongside in hope of bringing wholeness and shalom back into individual and community lives. God leads us with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. We meet each other within and through that love, and that is the tie that binds.