

Transformed by Incomprehensible Love

Psalm 45:6-15; Hosea 2:14-23 (text); 1 Pet. 2:9-10

Rev. Nollie Malabuyo • February 14, 2008

Today the world celebrates what it calls a day of love when husbands and wives and lovers shower each other with what they deem to be symbols of their love. A news article estimates that Americans buy 200 million roses on Valentine's Day! The rare sacrificial love is sometimes also seen on this day, such as a wife donating one of her kidneys to her ailing husband. My two-hour drive going home from seminary, all of thirty miles, turned into a four-hour nightmare because of gridlock all over Metro Manila because many couples were running all over the place trying to find a place still open for a romantic evening on Valentine's Day.

But in all of this excitement related to so-called "love," do we see real love in our cultures today? When it comes to sexuality, Filipino culture is no different from Western culture. Sexual immorality is rampant. Teen pregnancy is an epidemic. Adultery is commonplace. At every turn, we see separated husbands and wives, even though there is no divorce. Celebrities who lead unfaithful, sexually immoral lives are the role models. Giant billboards peddling sex dominate the cities' skylines.

Is this what God originally intended for his creation? No, on the contrary, God created sex and instituted marriage in the Garden of Eden for man's benefit and enjoyment. Man and wife are to be married "till death do us part."

Why then do we read in the book of Hosea that God wanted the prophet to marry an adulterous woman? That in spite of his wife's unfaithfulness, Hosea is to continue loving her? Is God telling us that sexual immorality and adultery are acceptable to him? By no means! That is not what he wants to tell us in Hosea. God's message in Hosea is that he transforms his people by his incomprehensible love: from a shameful adulterer, to a radiant bride, by a faithful lover.

From a Shameful Adulterer

Hosea's ministry spanned 50-60 years in 8th century Judah and Israel. At that time, Israel and Judah were peaceful and prosperous, but also had problems of injustice, breakdown in public ethics, ungodliness, and idolatry.

Hosea 4:2 is a catalog of violations of the Decalogue: "There is swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed." The people evidenced no love for God: "There is no faithfulness or steadfast love, and no knowledge of God in the land" (5:4). They worshiped the gods of their pagan neighbors: "My people inquire of a piece of wood, and their walking staff gives them oracles. For a spirit of whoredom has them astray, and they have left their God to play the whore" (4:12).

As a result of their covenant-breaking, God warned the northern kingdom of Israel the Assyrian empire would destroy them. Because of her sins, Israel was conquered by the Assyrians in 722 B.C., and the people were exiled all over the empire.

God focused on the problem of Israel's idolatry in Hosea. He calls idolatry spiritual adultery or prostitution, so he asks Hosea to marry Gomer, an adulterous woman. After their marriage, Gomer continues to be adulterous, but God asks Hosea to be faithful to her and to take her back from other men (3:1-3). As a result of her adulterous life, Gomer is being sold as a sex slave at an auction, naked and filthy, and Hosea is to buy her back. What humiliation for a husband! What shame for Gomer the adulterer!

In Scriptures, sin is often portrayed as the shame of nakedness. Before they sinned, Adam and Eve were naked, but they were not ashamed. After the Fall, they felt the shame of their nakedness, and tried in their own futile way to hide their nakedness before an all-knowing God. As a prostitute, Gomer the adulterous wife was shamefully naked as well.

Why would God ask Hosea to do such a shameful, humiliating thing? He wanted to show Israel that they were Gomer, committing spiritual adultery with other gods - the pagan gods Baal, Asteroth, and others they worshiped. God often called Israel's idolatry "prostituting after the Baals," such as in Judges 8:33.

God warned the Israelites before they entered Canaan the Promised Land, *"Do not inquire about their gods, saying, 'How did these nations serve their gods? - that I also may do the same'"* (Deut. 12:30-31). Aren't many churches today like those adulterous Israelites?

"Prostituting after the Baals" is exactly what most churches do today. They lust after the success of "purpose-driven life" churches. They envy the excitement of Pentecostal assemblies. They covet how movie and TV personalities entertain the world. They long for a pastor who would be like those "dynamic" speakers who are highly-skilled in delivering their stories, jokes, and PowerPoint presentations. And then they say, "Look how big those churches are! God must be blessing them. If we copy them, God will also bless us with big numbers."

Many evangelicals think that the church exists to evangelize, and because of this, the goal of public worship should be to attract the unchurched and entertain them with the things of the world. This is not God's purpose in public worship.

When we read of God's instructions to Israel on how they are to worship God in the Tabernacle and in the Temple, did he ever tailor their worship ceremonies and environment to attract Canaanites around them by adopting Baal worship idols and ceremonies? Certainly not! Remember when the Israelites expressed to Aaron their "felt need" to have *"gods who shall go before us"*? Aaron consented to their wicked request, so they had a "seeker-sensitive" worship of the golden calf, and God almost destroyed all of them if not for Moses' pleadings (Exod 32).

This is how the church today is a shameful adulterer. Worldliness is its idol.

To a Radiant Bride

But even when Gomer was an adulterous wife, God asks Hosea to buy her back, because God had planned to transform her from a shameful adulterer to a beautiful bride: *"Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. And there I will give her her vineyards and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope"* (Hosea 2:14-15).

God loves his people with an everlasting love, that even when she is unfaithful, God still “allures” her. Here, the word could mean “to attract,” “seduce,” “entice,” or “persuade,” but it could also mean “to deceive.” The first meaning seems to fit better the context of Hosea. God will bring Israel out of their slavery in Egypt and into the wilderness to test, strengthen, and purify the people. The parched wilderness and the valley of Achan’s trouble (Josh 7:10-26) will then be transformed into lush, green vineyards.

In the same way, God, in his incomprehensible love and mercy, promises to his people that he will bring them out from their exile back into the Promised Land. He will rescue them from slavery to sin and into the freedom of a righteous life.

He kept his promise to redeem his people Israel. In time, God brought back a remnant from Assyria and Babylon. They returned to the Promised Land, settled back in their homes, and rebuilt the Temple and the wall. Did this return to the Promised Land fulfill his promise of everlasting love and mercy for his people? No, because soon after their return from exile, Israel once again returned to their ungodly and unrighteous ways, and was invaded by foreign armies again. A greater fulfillment of God’s promise to his people still awaits.

And this promise looked forward to a Savior who would take his Bride back to be his eternal Wife. When Jesus first came, he betrothed himself to the Church. Betrothal in the Bible is not the same as engagement today. Ancient betrothal is almost like marriage, except that there is no sexual consummation yet. Remember when Joseph found out that Mary was with child? Mary was “betrothed” to Joseph, and he “resolved to divorce her quietly” so she would not be shamed, but they did not yet live together (Matt 1:18-19). But she was legally pledged to him. In the same way, the Church is legally betrothed to Christ, but the marriage has not been consummated yet.

Hosea’s promise that he would buy his unfaithful wife Gomer back from her lovers is a picture of the relationship between Christ and his Church. When Christ comes again, he will consummate his marriage to his Bride, the Church, *“And in that day, declares the Lord, you will call me ‘My Husband,’ And I will betroth you to me forever”* (Hos 2:16).

Christ’s promise to take the Church as his wife will not be like the broken promises that we see today. Not just a dozen roses, or a box of chocolate, or a beautiful dress. Not like the broken “I do’s” in many weddings today.

When that day comes, the Church will not be a prostitute who *“adorned herself with her ring and jewelry, and went after her lovers”* (2:13). But Christ will put a ring on her finger, as a symbol of his never-to-be-broken promise to “nourish and cherish” her forever (Eph 5:29; see also Luke 15:22). Instead of elegant wedding hats, Christ will give her a royal crown of righteousness, which is also a crown of life, fitting for a queen (2 Tim 4:8; Rev 2:10).

Christ will clothe the Church, not with a seductive, body-hugging, skimpy dress, but will deck her in “fine linen, bright and pure,” which is Christ’s own righteousness (Rev 19:8). As she is led to her King, her many-colored royal robe will be glorious and “interwoven with gold” (Psa 45:13-14). From a filthy, naked, shameful adulterer, she will be presented to Christ her husband as a radiant bride *“in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy*

and without blemish" (Ephesians 5:27). She will be so perfectly beautiful, that the King will "desire her beauty" (Psa 45:11).

She will not just have a humble, earthly home, but "*with joy and gladness they are led along as they enter the palace of the king*" in the heavenly places (Psa 45:15). On that day, the Bride of Christ, the holy city, will come down "*out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband*" (Rev 21:2). There will be "rejoicing and exulting" in heaven, "*for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready*" (Rev 19:7).

The people of God are transformed from a shameful adulterer to a radiant Bride. But how does God accomplish this transformation?

By a Faithful Lover

God accomplishes this transformation by the work of Christ on the cross. While it cost Hosea much money to buy his adulterous wife back from her lovers, the cost for Christ in redeeming his Bride from sin was much more precious than money.

It cost him unspeakable humiliation. Leaving his glory in heaven, he humbled himself and "*made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men*" (Phil 2:7).

It cost him unimaginable shame. Hosea did not become a substitute for his adulterous wife. But Jesus became a substitute for his sinful Bride. He was stripped naked and paraded around the streets of Jerusalem. Most of all, "*he who had no sin became sin for us,*" as one naked before God (2 Cor 5:21). He bore our reproach, and the shame and curse of the cross was laid on him.

It cost him the ultimate sacrifice, his life. "*He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross*" (Phil 2:8). A husband promises to love and to cherish his wife, but would he keep this promise if his wife was unfaithful? Not so with Christ, who, like Hosea, kept his promise, even to an adulterous Bride: he "*loved the church and gave himself up for her.*" When the Bride of Christ was filthy, he "*cleansed her by the washing of water with the word*" (Eph 5:25-26). He purifies the Church with his own precious blood shed on the cross.

Hosea was faithful to his adulterous wife until the day he died. But Jesus promises to his Bride that he will be with her, not only till death, but "always, to the end of the age" (Mt 28:20). Not only that; Jesus promises that he will be a husband to his Bride "*in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy... [and] in faithfulness*" (Hos 2:19-20). And Jesus promises that he will, on the last day, come to take his Bride with him to the heavenly city, to dwell with her and to be her Husband forever.

Conclusion

Hosea's wife was an adulterous woman, and her children are illustrations of those disinherited by God. They are under God's judgment, they receive no mercy from God, and they are not God's people (1:2-8). But God promised Israel that in spite of their grievous sins, he would save a remnant from all nations, have mercy on them, and call them "children of the living God" once more (1:10). What immeasurable and incomprehensible grace, mercy and love!

This is why Peter could say that Hosea's children are a picture of the Church because we who were formerly ungodly and unrighteous idolaters were "*not a people*," but now have been made God's people. We who once "*had not received mercy, have now received mercy*" (1 Pet 2:9-10).

Peter not only confirms this change of status of the Church before God; he also urges you to show the pagan world that you are God's people in two ways. First, as "*a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation*," you are to "*proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light*." Knowing that you have been transformed from idolatrous pagans to the Bride of Christ, you are to strive in bringing others from idolatry to true worship by proclaiming the good news of Christ's mercy and love for sinners.

Second, as "sojourners and exiles" passing through this world (1 Pet 2:11), you are to stay away from the lusts and idols of this world that are useless and passing away. In this way, the world will see by your good deeds that you are really God's people who have received mercy, so that they too may "*glorify God on the day of visitation*." So that they too will be called God's people, and look up to heaven and say, "You are my God." Amen.