

Try A Little Tenderness

This morning we hear words from Hosea, a prophetic voice dating from the 8th century BCE. The kingdom has long been a divided one at this point, and the people find themselves in the midst of turmoil on every side. Hosea preached during the last chaotic decades of the northern kingdom, when Israel lived in conflict with Judah, the southern kingdom and under constant threat from Assyria.¹ At this moment, some in Israel have already fled to Egypt and submitted to Assyrian rule after one invasion. The northern kingdom is teetering on the brink of defeat and exile. Last week we heard Elijah pushing the people to choose between gods who remain silent and the God of their ancestors. The fire raining down on the rebuilt and drenched altar has now burned itself down to a few charred remnants. The nation has made their choice.

[Read Hosea 11: 1-9]

At the risk of dating myself, *Bull Durham* is still near the top of my list of all-time great movies. It is silly and sweet and poignant all at the same time. Nuke LaLoosh is a shooting star pitcher who won't be in the minors for long. Crash Davis is the veteran who has made it to the show, the majors for a brief moment. The two have been at odds from the beginning when Nuke struts in thinking he is God's gift, and things spiral from there. One of my favorite scenes comes when the team is riding a beat-up bus from one away game to another. Nuke is playing the guitar poorly and singing, even more poorly. He keeps stumbling over the lyrics: "Young girls they do get wooly, because of all the stress..." he croons. Crash reaches his limit: "No one

¹ [Harper Collins Bible Commentary](#). San Francisco: Harper Collins, p. 635, as cited by my colleague Jessica Tate in her paper for the Well 2015.

gets wooly! Women get weary.”² Crash is weary, which may be why the song, “Try A Little Tenderness” being butchered bugs him so much. Nuke does not understand tenderness or what bone-tired weariness feels like, but Crash does. He is worn out and all but washed out. He is still trying to play the game for a bit longer, the game that has captured his heart and broken it at the same time.

Through Hosea, we overhear the internal debate God seems to be having with Godself. God is weary, too, and heartbroken. Scholars note that this is the first time we hear God speak of love in relationship to Israel.³ “That seems hard to believe,” my friend Jessica says, “perhaps because I take that idea so much for granted. What did I learn in Sunday school all those years if not that God loves me?”⁴ Yes, Jesus loves me. We learn it from day one. We teach it from the beginning. We hope that Violet and every other child—those we promise to raise in the faith and those we never meet—know that Jesus loves them, too. And through Hosea’s words we are reminded that long before Jesus is even a twinkle in ancient Israel’s eye, God loves them.

I suspect that the northern kingdom of Israel is weary, too. While their weariness does not excuse the people’s turning their backs on the God who has created them, protected them, and taught them to walk, it helps explain it. After all, for all of God’s love and devotion, they are still in the thick of a war zone, tossed about at the whim of crooked kings who have long ago abandoned the covenant made with and by their ancestor David. They are weary, bone-tired, and frightened. And God decides to respond to their perpetual unfaithfulness not with wrath but with tenderness.

² <https://youtu.be/EroyjPcw3sg>

³ Birch, Bruce. Westminster Bible Companion: Hosea, Joel, and Amos. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997, 98.

⁴ Tate

I have a bad habit of singing the wrong lyrics, which is not a problem when I'm singing in the car by myself. But I have been known to irk some beloved family members when I get the lyrics wrong around them, so I thought I should look up the correct words to "Try a Little Tenderness," before mentioning the song this morning. I know better than to think it says young girls get wooly, but I'm not sure I ever paid close enough attention to other lyrics. It turns out that the words Otis Redding sings are lovelier than anything I could have made up:

It's not just sentimental ...

She has her grief and care...

But the soft words they are spoke so gentle, yeah

It makes it easier, easier to bear, yeah

You won't regret it no, no

Young girls they don't forget it⁵

I'm not sure the same can be said about the northern kingdom of Israel. The fiery showdown with the false prophets did not convince them. They will forget. God's words of tenderness will not sway them for long, if at all. And yet, this remains God's posture: "I will not come in wrath."

Holy wrath must be tempting, right? I came across words on a parenting blog that insisted that it was time for us to admit that parenting is hard. It is one kind of hard when they are toddlers. It is a different kind of hard when they are teenagers and young adults. Almost all parents will tell you that parenting is a gift, but that does not mean it is easy. Whether or not you have been a parent, we have all been children, and I would wager that the majority of us have given our parents something to worry about, something to be frustrated about, something

⁵ <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/otisredding/tryalittle Tenderness.html>

that has pushed the relationship to the brink. Sadly, some parents respond in rage. Sometimes the parent-child relationship is fractured beyond repair. God's relationship with Israel certainly appears to be—the children, “the people are bent on turning away,” and yet, at least with God, the tenderness remains.

Another blogging mom named Rachel posted a picture of her son from when he was 8 and dressed for Halloween. And then she writes:

Today is his sixteenth birthday.

And I haven't seen him for more than three days in 18 months. I try, I reach out, I call, I sent birthday presents. Because despite being estranged, I love him. He's my son.⁶

I don't know the story behind their broken relationship, but her tender spot, her broken heart prompted her to write a post encouraging people to be gentle with one another because we do not and cannot fully know what others are carrying. Tenderness, really, is what she encourages. Tenderness. Try a little tenderness.

Tenderness is not my default drive, especially when I—like you—swim in a world drowning in suspicion, outrage, defensiveness, accusations, meanness, and despair. I think it helps to get a window into God's internal debate here and realize that God gets angry, too, that God is fed up and ready to obliterate it all—us all—and start fresh with a new people, with new children and decides not to, more than once, more times than I could ever count. There are consequences. Israel will find itself in ruins, as will their siblings in Judah. And yet at the end of the day, God decides and declares, “I will not come in wrath.”

⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/findingjoyblog/posts/2757583934280890>

In an age where countless voices constantly tell us to toughen up, get over it, choose sides, take care of our own, and write off those who look, think, speak, love, and act in ways we do not understand, tenderness seems downright ridiculous, doesn't it? And yet, in Rachel and in Hosea's God, I hear a stronger more urgent voice drawing me down a different path. Rachel ends her post about her son with these words:

As I sat on my couch, thinking back to sixteen years ago to when the pains of labor racked my body I thought it was such a reminder of how motherhood, parenthood, has those moments tucked within. And yet, we go through them, we deal, we are strong...because we love...To my son, happy sixteenth. I'll always love you, always be here waiting for you. And it's never changed - I'm still so proud to be the one on this earth who you call mom.⁷

Strong, because we love—not in spite of love, but because. So often we understand the God of the Old Testament, the God of the Hebrew Scriptures to be decidedly different from the God we meet in Jesus. And yet the God we meet in Genesis at creation is the same God who becomes a dressmaker to clothe the wayward Adam and Eve. The God we meet in Exodus on the mountain is the God who feeds the grumbling Israelites day in and day out without fail in the desert. This God builds a kingdom through the impetuous dancing shepherd boy named David. No matter how many times the people turn away, this God chooses not to come in wrath. God's strength is found not in wrath but in love. Tenderness does not turn God into a big teddy bear. Instead this tenderness tells us that the Lord of the Universe, the very one who

⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/findingjoyblog/posts/2757583934280890>

could crush the world in an instant chooses to cradle it instead. And this God is the God who comes to us in Jesus.

Our tradition holds that Jesus and the Holy Spirit have always been part of God. They are not a late add or a Hail Mary. They are who God is: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Three in one. One in three. This same tender, bending God reveals the depth of his love for all his children by taking on all of our hurt, all of our disdain, all of our unfaithfulness, all of our cruelty in Christ's death on the cross.

"I will not come in wrath," God insists. Amazingly, God does come, in love, compassion, faithfulness, and resurrection power. God turns and keeps turning, bends and keeps bending toward the world in love. God tries a little tenderness, again and again, hoping to reach and redeem every last weary and wayward child, including you and me. That is what God does and has always done. This is who God is and always has been and always will be.

Thanks be to God. Amen.