

Most people in the church learned what they know about the Bible when they were children going to Sunday School. There are people, like yourselves, who learned more than that, but most of the time people stop learning about the Bible when they are children. It's a sad thing really, because although many important stories in the Bible are easy for children to learn, the Bible is primarily an adult book and a lot of it is not taught in children's Sunday School because it is considered inappropriate, beyond the comprehension of a child.

For this reason, one book in the Bible that is virtually unknown is the book of Hosea. Hosea was a prophet in Israel about seven hundred years before Jesus. Most people think a prophet is someone who predicted the future. But really the main job of prophets was to be messengers of God. God would choose prophets and give them messages for the people. Most of God's messages told the people to be fair and just, especially to the poor.

The messages God gave the prophets for the people were often just verbal messages. "Tell them this," God would say, and the prophet would tell God's message to the people verbatim.

But sometimes instead of a verbal message God would give a prophet something to do to illustrate something with actions rather than words. And it was this kind of message that God gave to the prophet Hosea.

And what God told Hosea to do is the reason that children are not taught this story in Sunday School.

God told Hosea to go out intentionally and find a prostitute and marry her. The reason God told him to do this was so that Hosea's marriage to the prostitute would illustrate what God's relationship to Israel was like. God had taken the people of Israel in marriage, but they were unfaithful to him, running around with other gods.

So to be obedient to God this is what Hosea did. He went out and married a prostitute named Gomer, to my mind one of the prettiest girl's names in the Bible.

As you would anticipate, marriage did not make Gomer faithful. She continued to sell herself to other men and even had children by them. And when these children of prostitution were born, God told Hosea what to name them.

Naming children is not an easy thing for anyone. You are choosing something to be attached to a child for life so generally you want to be careful.

There was a woman in my church in Lithonia, an elderly woman who died a few years ago. Now her daddy knew how to give names. He had been a Georgia country doctor who rode out about the countryside on horseback. He delivered hundreds of babies in rural Georgia and said he was sick of the ordinary names people gave their children, so he decided to give his children special names.

To his daughter, the elderly woman in my church, he gave the name Goldmedal. And to one of her brothers he gave the name President Vanderbilt. Now those are names!

Now these are creative names and God, being creative, you'd think that God would come up with names like that.

You would expect God to be careful in choosing names for Hosea's children, but but God gave the name Jezreel to the first baby. Jezreel was a place of tragedy for the people of Israel. That would be like a Southerner after the Civil War naming a child Gettysburg, or a Jew after the second world war naming a child Auschwitz .

This was God's way of illustrating that his relationship with Israel had been a disaster for him.

And the second child of Gomer's prostitution God told Hosea to name No Pity. What kind of name is that? This name gave the message that God would no longer show mercy on his unfaithful people.

And the third child God told Hosea to name Not My People, because no longer was God going to honor his marriage to this unfaithful people.

Hosea's life with his unfaithful wife was an illustration of God's painful relationship with his unfaithful people.

But then the story takes a stranger turn. Gomer, Hosea's prostitute wife, becomes more and more unfaithful and she sinks so low as to finally sell herself into slavery. And God tells Hosea to go and get his unfaithful wife and bring her home and continue to love her.

So Hosea goes and purchases Gomer back for fifteen shekels of silver, some wine, and a homer of barley. A homer was a measurement like a bushel. I was tempted to entitle this sermon , "A Homer for Gomer but...

Hosea goes out and brings her back. He has every right to abandon her to her own self destruction. But he goes out and brings her home, dedicated to love her no matter what she has done.

God instructs Hosea to marry a wife of prostitution so that Hosea's life with an unfaithful spouse will illustrate what God's life with Israel is like.

And when Gomer is unfaithful over and over again, deserving no love from Hosea, God tells Hosea to go out and bring her home and love her. This is what God is like with his unfaithful people, we deserve no love, but he brings us home to love us.

The Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans. "What if someone is unfaithful to God? Does the faithlessness of people nullify the faithfulness of God?"

"By no means," says Paul, "God is true though every person be false."

God's faithfulness to us is not contingent upon our faithfulness to him. That's the Gospel.

And so, seven hundred years later Jesus teaches us in the Sermon on the Mount: turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, return no one evil for evil. Our behavior,

just like God's, is to be unilaterally faithful . Though all others be unfaithful we will be true and steadfast.

In recent years churches have more and more asked less and less of their people. The meaning of a Christian life is reduced to just being a nice person. Just be fair to each other and that's enough.

But the story of Hosea teaches us that God's way is more than just just. Human justice is that whatever you do to me I will do to you. God's way is to remain faithful and loving even when people are unfaithful and unloving to you.

Christianity is not a "just be nice" wimpy religion. It demands us to be true no matter what.