

RELAY: A WITNESS TO LOVE
DEUTERONOMY 6:4-9, MATTHEW 22:34-40
PASTOR RYAN WELSHANS
5.19.2024 @ MUNDELEIN NAZ

Deuteronomy 6:4-9 (NIV)

4 Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 5 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. 6 These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. 7 Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. 8 Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. 9 Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

Matthew 22:34-40 (NIV)

34 Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. 35 One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: 36 “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” 37 Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

A LOVE THAT INSPIRES

What are the kinds of love stories that inspire you?

Most of the love stories we're presented with are meant to excite and entertain us. Romeo and Juliet type stories of passionate young love, or romantic comedies that are entertaining and hilarious.

But there's another kind of love story, the one that doesn't excite or entertain us so much as it **inspires us, challenges us, and stirs up in us a sense of desire and hope**. That love story would be a **long lasting one**. Maybe you've been to an anniversary celebration of a couple who have been together for a long time...

Even here Mundelein Naz we have folks who have been cultivating a long lasting love... 10, 15, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60 years of marriage! It's more than just "exciting", that kind of love is a powerful thing to witness.

How about a friendship that has lasted decades, that can also be something to marvel at.

Witnessing those relationships stirs up desires and hopes that we can have that for ourselves.

I mention this because the same thing can be said for our relationship with God. Yes, our relationship with God is intensely personal, but it should be something that others witness and want for themselves.

We talk all the time about sharing God's love with people, which is important for sure, it is key to the christian life, but there's something even deeper, and at times even more impactful.

A part of my faith story is when I met this kid in high school who had a relationship with God that was just different. Yes, he showed me kindness and friendship in Jesus name, but it came from a relationship with God that I knew instantly I didn't have, and I wanted it. I wanted to know the God he knew, I was inspired to love the God he loved.

What we love, whether we like it or not, will eventually impact and influence those around us.

My wife has been getting back into gardening lately, it's something she's always loved, but hasn't had much time or support from the rest of us to do, and so we've been building raised garden beds, planting flowers and vegetable gardens all around the house. Gardening is not my cup of tea, but it is my wife's cup of tea, so I am forced to drink. But honestly, what it has brought out of my wife has been very life giving and joyful. There are times when her love for gardening reaches out and inspires me, and creates in me a love for gardening too.

For whatever reason we act like this same effect doesn't happen when people witness our love, joy, struggle, and just overall life with God. A part of the issue might be that we don't grasp the depth of God's love for us, and the kind of relationship God wants to have with us, and how powerful a witness it's meant to be in the world.

One of the things that I love about the scriptures, is how often there are phrases, images, parables, and allegories that put words to things that we have a hard time understanding or being able to fully describe. One of the images that we have for the type of relationship that we are meant to have with God is that of a marriage.

And the group of biblical authors that use this imagery in rich detail are the prophets, and they would be the ones to do this, with their dramatic, colorful, and performer-like ways of delivering God's message to his people. Look at what the prophet Isaiah says...

Isaiah 62:5 (NIV)

*5 As a young man marries a young woman,
so will your Builder marry you;
as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride,
so will your God rejoice over you.*

Let's stop here for a second and address a few things because some of us might be thinking that this is just strange, "God wants to marry me, that's odd". And there's this other factor...

There are those of us in the room who are happily married, some of who may be struggling in their marriage, who are getting married, who aren't married yet, who may never get married, who have experienced the death of a spouse, and those who have experienced the death of marriage through divorce. We're all coming in here with different experiences, and I want us to not get too bothered or weirded out by this imagery, because it is meant to cause a reaction in you, and that's a good thing.

You're not going to find any other religion that talks about God's love and relationship with his people in this way. Our Creator, our Builder wants to marry us.

Yes, he is King, Savior, Lord, Alpha, Omega, Almighty God, Heavenly Father, Good Shepherd. But in this text and many others we see that God wants to have a much deeper relationship with us that those other descriptions don't fully express.

So, let's think about what a marriage is meant to be, and why God would use this imagery.

Exclusive
Intimate
Transforming
Partnership

When you marry someone, they become your **exclusive** commitment and priority. Over your job, hobbies, family, friends, and children. As my friend Mandy Stock from back home would say, there's an exclusive VIP club that only her and her husband belong to, and there are no other members allowed. In fact, all other relationships find their purpose and place in relation to your marriage, and there can be major problems when other things get in the way.

When kids, other family, jobs, friends, hobbies, whatever else attempts or is allowed to come between a marriage there will always be problems.

And when you marry someone, they are saying... "I can handle being that exclusive person in your life, I can be trusted with that."

That's the kind of exclusive relationship that God wants with us, more than any other relationship we have or ever will have. He is meant to be the one in whom everything else in our life finds its proper place and purpose. And, God wants to trust him with that!! God is saying that he can bear all of you, and he wants to!

Marriage is also about **intimacy**. There are things that are obvious here, but the closeness in a marriage is really the ultimate kind of intimacy you can have with another human being, by design. Your spouse knows you better than anyone. They know you better than you know yourself. Your spouse also knows you on a passionately intimate level, better than anyone.

God knows us more intimately than anyone. He is our very Maker, he is the very Creator of intimacy! He desires a closeness with us that has no boundaries, no holding back. You can't have a relationship with God from a distance, it just doesn't work like that. Again, there's a trust here, an openness, a vulnerability that God is saying he wants you to experience in him.

Marriage also involves **transformation**. When you make your spouse your exclusive priority and you have a deep intimacy with them, you cannot help but be changed by them. More than anyone else on earth, your spouse has the power to change, mold, and shape you. Their influence over your life is tremendous. This is why it's so important that we take seriously who we marry, because they will change you, either for the better or the worse, but that's a different sermon for a different day, but have you seen those couples that are so close that they seem to kind of be like the same person? They have such a powerful influence on each other that they transform each other, and seem at times like the same person.

That's like the transforming closeness God wants with us, to where we start to look and live like we're one with him, because we are! Your relationship with God is meant to be the most transformational you'll ever encounter. God is the one who does the transforming of our mind and heart, but that doesn't occur simply "because". It happens because we allow it, we want it, we spend the time with him, we take the faith steps in him, we draw closer to him, and we seek most of all his transformation hand in our life.

Lastly, marriage is a **partnership**. It's not two people just doing their own thing for their own purposes, but two people who have become one, and live with purpose together. In raising a family, in developing friendships, in serving their church, and community. In the best marriages you see that these are two individual people, but they are partners in this life, and it impacts others around them.

God wants us to participate and partner with him in the blessings and restoration of this broken world. We say "God is working", and we mean that with every fiber of our being, but in his working, he mostly does that through partnering with his people!

Now, that's all what a marriage brings to mind and how God wants to be with us, but notice that he doesn't say spouse or husband in that Isaiah passage, **he says that he is like the Bridegroom**.

Which brings an even deeper and more amazing image. If you've ever been to a wedding or you remember your own, think of the groom here, waiting for his bride to walk down and be handed off to him. The excitement, joy, anticipation, the weight of it all!

I remember Leslie and my wedding.. The pastor told me to bend my knees a little when the doors opened and she walked down the aisle. I'm glad he did because when I saw her in that dress, walking slowly towards me, I had never seen anything more beautiful... and she was going to be my wife!

It's like in Genesis 2, where we see the first wedding between Adam and Eve.

Genesis 2:22-25 (NIV)

22 Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

23 The man said,

*"This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;*

*she shall be called 'woman,'
for she was taken out of man."*

Here you have the first wedding ceremony, the first love song, and the first marriage.

And God says that he wants to be the Bridegroom, he's the one with the overwhelming love and affection! When he sees us he sees something so beautiful that he rejoices!! Remember that line from the Isaiah passage:

*"as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride,
so will your God rejoice over you."*

Do you ever think of God's love for you like that?

This is **one of the great themes and images all throughout God's story!** We see images like this with other prophets like Jeremiah, Ezekiel, but this is also an image that Jesus himself evoked.

Remember the first miracle he performed... **It was at a wedding.** In John 2 he turns water into wine, and keeps the party going, **but he's also making a statement about himself... I am the Bridegroom"**

Throughout his ministry and in parables he would call himself the Bridegroom, and then Paul later on picks up on this and calls the Church, **the Bride of Christ** (Ephesians 5), and John when writing down his revelation, as he pens the last couple of chapters he writes:

Revelation 21:1-4 (NIV)

21 Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. 2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

Do you know God like this? Do you know this kind of love he has for you? Do you understand the kind of relationship he desires to have with you? It's almost too much to really be able to take in, but it's true, and it is meant to be witnessed by others.

UNFAITHFULNESS

What can ruin that? What can put that witness of love in jeopardy?

Just as the prophets used the imagery of marriage to describe the closeness God wants to have with us, they also used unfaithfulness and adultery as a picture of what happens when God's people love and worship something or someone other than God. This is a huge theme in the life of God's people, still is today.

There's a prophet in the Old Testament who embodies this literally. Prophets were like street performing artists who didn't just deliver God's message to his people through words, but also

their bodies and life. And there came a point in Israel's history where they were consistently worshiping other gods, and eventually found their kingdom split up between the north and south, and God sent a prophet named Hosea to deliver his message at a very crucial time of Israel's unfaithfulness to God.

Hosea 1:2 (NLT)

2 When the Lord first began speaking to Israel through Hosea, he said to him, "Go and marry a prostitute, so that some of her children will be conceived in prostitution. This will illustrate how Israel has acted like a prostitute by turning against the Lord and worshiping other gods."

And he does marry a prostitute named Gomer, she has kids, and lives as a prostitute. It's such an uncomfortable image, and it's meant to be. We're meant to be shocked that this man Hosea is going to willfully marry a prostitute who will openly cheat on him, **for most of us that's a deal breaker.**

But if the image of marriage is a powerful one for understanding God's love for us, then the image of adultery is just as powerful in revealing the pain and destruction caused by our sin.

In many ways we all have a tendency to belittle, excuse, or just not look at our sin and unfaithfulness in the proper light.

When we sin, we break God's heart, when we are unfaithful and live without him in that exclusive, intimate, transforming partnering relationship, we're spiritually cheating on God.

There's a few times in the book where God describes Israel as having a "**spirit of prostitution**". Which sounds so dark, and you may be offended by that, and that's okay because it's alive and well today too! Remember, the scriptures put words to things that we may not fully be able to express or understand., We don't understand the depths of our unfaithfulness, we don't grasp our human default to loving and worshiping things other than God, and how that damages our most treasured relationship with our Creator. You might be thinking "I'm not a spiritual prostitute"! But actually you have found yourself in moments in life where you say "my work has too much of me", or "I'm losing myself in _____". Some of us who battle addiction know this all too well, but others of us don't see that we chase after things other than God all the time!

As the 13th Century priest and philosopher **Thomas Aquinas said that we are drawn to replace God with 4 things, money, power, pleasure, and fame.**

Anytime we are giving ourselves and our identity away from the One to whom we are meant to love and be in a covenant relationship with we are **spiritually prostituting ourselves.**

Okay, that's the bad news that we all live every day... So what's the good news?

God still loves and wants to rescue prostitutes.

No matter how far we stray, no matter how many times we reject him, cheat on him, and attempt to ruin a good and beautiful marriage, God still chases after us.

Hosea 2:19-20 (NLT)

19 I will make you my wife forever,
showing you righteousness and justice,
unfailing love and compassion.

20 I will be faithful to you and make you mine,
and you will finally know me as the Lord.

The hebrew word there for unfailing love and compassion or in some translations “lovingkindness”,

it’s a powerful hebrew word called “**hesed**” and it’s “goodness, kindness, faithfulness” That doesn’t make sense! If your spouse cheats on you over and over again, are you chasing after them with “hesed”? No way! But God does!

The message of Hosea is actually good news. Look what he tells Hosea to do:

Hosea 3:1 (NLT)

1 Then the Lord said to me, “Go and love your wife again, even though she commits adultery with another lover. This will illustrate that the Lord still loves Israel, even though the people have turned to other gods and love to worship them.”

Hosea’s name means “Saves”. In fact Joshua, from the time of Moses, before he was given the name Joshua, he was called Hoshea...“saves” (Numbers 13). And Jesus’ name in Hebrew is Yeshua, which is connected to the name Joshua... The Lord Saves!

And Hosea does go after his adulterous wife. He literally buys Gomer back.

God’s done the same for us through the death and resurrection of Jesus...

Ephesians 5:25-30 (NIV)

25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her 26 to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, 27 and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

What’s our response to this? How should you respond to a God that loves you that much, that wants to be that close to you, and has paid the price for your sin, and wants to rescue you, restore you, and make you a radiant light in a dark world? How do you respond?

STAYING FAITHFUL

When Jesus was asked by a religious leader what’s the most important command, he told him...

Matthew 22:37-38 (NIV)

37 Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ 38 This is the first and greatest commandment.

Jesus quotes The Shema from Deuteronomy 6, the great prayer of Israel, and really the heartbeat of all God's people. Loving God with all of our being is what we're made to do, and it's our response to God's love. It doesn't come from obligation or force, it's our "I do", and it's our life of faithfulness to God for the world to see!

And if we keep reading on in Deuteronomy 6, we see this impact it's supposed to have:

Deuteronomy 6:6-9 (NIV)

6 These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. 7 Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. 8 Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. 9 Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

- Talk about your love for God at home, when you're walking, when you go to bed, when you get up.
- Have symbols on your body that remind you of his love
- Have things in your home that cause you to talk about God's love
- Share your love for God with the younger generation, and others.

Let your whole life be a witness of a love for God, and when your life is filled with God's love, it will spill out onto others. Jesus said:

39 And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Loving others is directly linked to loving God. Like any good marriage, that love between those people doesn't stay with them, it impacts younger generations, their neighbors, their community, their world. But, it doesn't stop there...

Friends, if we're going to love and lead people into a relationship with God, they need people who will show them how to worship, how to pray, how to be disciplined, how to trust God in the midst of suffering. Like an old marriage, they need to see that faithful love for God in us.

FOR MANY PEOPLE THE REALIZATION THAT THEY ARE NOT ONLY FULLY LOVED BY GOD, BUT THAT THEY CAN FULLY LOVE GOD BACK ONLY OCCURS WHEN THEY WITNESS THAT IN OTHERS.

CAN ANYONE TELL?

You saw a parent or grandparent who loved God and prayed for you every night.

You talked to someone who came to Christ and walked away from a life of sin because of their love for God.

You quietly watched someone get a diagnosis and suffer, but their love and trust of God was with them to the end of their life.

You saw someone forgive and serve a person who you would have considered their enemy, but they loved them because their love for God compelled them to.

We're all going to love God based on how we're wired, but our call is to love him with all we are, wherever we are!

So, for each of us we have to ask ourselves, “can anyone tell based on my life that I know I’m loved by God, and that I love him with all of my being?”

And look, there might be a hesitancy around all this because we've seen people try to share their love for God badly, by judging people, throwing Bibles in people's faces and what not, but...

I wear a wedding ring for all to see, to announce that I am in a covenant relationship
There's things I won't do because I am married
There are places I won't go because I'm married
There are things I've experienced only because I am married
If you get to know me, even a little bit... you'll find out quick I'm married to Leslie
Many of the stories that shape my life that you'll hear involve my wife and kids
Is that boasting, showing off, or shoving it in peoples faces?

Or am I sharing what I love with you?

GOD'S LOVE WASN'T HIDDEN

God does not hide his love for you or anyone on this planet. He willingly went to a humiliating death on a cross, naked, beaten, and hung there for everyone to see. Then after his death, he was resurrected, seen by hundreds of people. Then leaves his Spirit with us and in us to experience his presence every day! If God's love for you and I can be only such a display, **I'm not worried about others witnessing my love for him... especially those who I want to experience that love too.**

Amen.

Questions To Consider Or Discuss Within A Group

- What's the longest marriage you've seen celebrated?
- How do you feel about God wanting to “marry his people”?
- In what areas of your life have you been “unfaithful” to God recently?
- How does it feel to know that God loves us, even when we're unfaithful?
- In what ways can you better say “I do” to God in your walk with him?

WORK CITED

Green, Timothy M.. NBBC, Hosea-Micah: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition . Nazarene Publishing House. Kindle Edition.