“***How Can I Give You Up?***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, August 4, 2019

**Hosea 11:1–9**

1When Israel was a child, I loved him. Out of Egypt I called my son.
2 The more I called them, the more they went from me;
 they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols.

3 Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk I took them up in my arms;
 but they did not know that I healed them.

4 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.

5 They shall return to the land of Egypt . . .
because they have refused to return to me. . . . 8 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 Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.

9 I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim;
for I am God and no mortal . . . and I will not come in wrath.

**Luke 12:13–21**

13Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” 14But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” 15And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” 16Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. 17-8And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops? I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 19And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ 20But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ 21So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.”

The Hosea passage is very dramatic. The prophet pictures God’s love overwhelming God’s justice. Of course, this never *really* happens, because God is not a human being with conflicting emotions and priorities. There is no conflict in God. But the prophet needs to use such humanizing imagery to make God approachable, and in order to say that God’s love is so strong that he will act to save Israel, even when she doesn’t particularly deserve it.

There is a lot of emotion—a lot of *love*—in the prophet Hosea. This passage starts with God reminding the little child Israel that he nurtured him in prior times, like a mother bending down to take care of a baby. God appeals to their national memory of what he did for the people of Israel, with an emphasis on the love that motivated him: “I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love [*ahavah*]” (11:4). So they should have been full of gratitude. And yet they turned away to the Baals, the nature gods of Canaan. They were seduced by the often appealing and sensual pagan customs. Hosea is trying to make them feel ashamed and worried about their foolishness. According to the prophets, such disloyalty deserved a punishment like the fire and brimstone that was rained down on Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim (Gen 14:8; 19:15–25). Although there is a big threat here, as in the other prophets, Hosea puts a stronger emphasis on love, even using that surprising image of God bending down, guiding, teaching, and feeding Israel as a mother would her child.

Jesus, in his teachings, also puts an emphasis on love and on God’s faithfulness, but this gospel story concerns people who tried to draw him away from his primary focus and get him to act as a judge in their dispute over money. Jesus’ impatience with such foolish materialism shows through: “who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” (Luke 12:14). Then he tells a parable to make the point about how temporary and fleeting are earthly riches. No matter how successfully we pursue them, nor how carefully we protect them, they all disappear at the moment of death.

There’s a traditional American tune called “All My Tears,” which has these stanzas: “Gold and silver blind the eye; Temporary riches lie; Come and eat from heaven’s store; Come and drink, and thirst no more.” I especially like that line, “temporary riches lie.” Really, it is materialistic people who lie, saying that worldly riches bring security and power, and that such riches are all that matter. The gospel tells us how *temporary* such things are, and of *no* consequence when it’s your time to die. You can’t take your barns or your wealth with you—but only your *spiritual* riches. Those have real lasting power. As he goes on to say later in this chapter, spiritual treasures “do not wear out,” nor does the moth corrupt them (12:33). They are *kept* for you. Furthermore, “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (12:34).

This means you get to choose your own treasure, and your character is shaped by what you treasure. If you value knowledge and learning and thoughtfulness, then you will get a chance to learn as much as you want, and you will be deemed wise, even if you don’t feel wise right now.

Your spiritual character is shaped by what you *love*—what you strive for—more than by what you *have*. I have a diploma up on my wall. So what! What matters is: do I *love* learning? Do I *cherish* truth, and knowledge, and reality, and spiritual wisdom? My destiny is shaped more by *what I love and hope for*, than by what I *have*. The rich man in the parable loved only his stores of grain, his goods, so God has to call him “Fool,” at the end. Somebody else is going to possess all his goods. But you *do* get to possess your spiritual goods, those you have made your own through faith, decision-making, loyalty, sincerity, and perseverance. Character matters. In fact, character, relationships, and precious memories are the only things you take with you when you die.

If you treasure truth and goodness and justice and love, then you are reflecting the values taught to you by your divine Father-Mother who nurtured you, who bent down to teach you the right values, to teach you with *love*. God says “how can I give you up? I lead you with cords of human kindness. I value your character. I help you to nurture it, like caring for a garden. Let me be your co-gardener. Do your part, and I will provide the sunshine and the rain. Well, *sometimes* you may need to do some watering.