

Have you ever had a misunderstanding in a conversation? You think you hear one thing and they actually said quite another. Sort of a wait, what? Oh, I thought you said something completely different. Some time back I was in a conversation here at church on a Wednesday night down at the other end....telling me about a situation they found themselves in and just feeling really torn...feeling like one situation didn't have his best interest but not sure the other option was going to be any better. So I'm listening and thinking of a response and then he said there's a tug a war going on. In my best, serious, pastoral counseling voice – and let's just be real – if you need pastoral counseling Pastor Brian is your go to – but I say – I get that it's like you're caught in the middle and are being pulled by both sides in this tug of war. It seemed like such a good analogy and I'd really run with it. But, then he looked me with a really funny look on his face and said I hope I'm not in a tug of war game – I don't have stretch Armstrong arms. I'm not that flexible. I thought that's weird – he's taking that really literal. So, I say, well not a literal tug-a-war, I just meant you were caught in the middle. He looks at me and then points to the gym – where I'd forgotten there was a youth event happening in the gym at that moment – and says, no there's an actual tug-a-war happening in there.

Sometimes knowing what everyone is talking about is really helpful but sometimes it's hilarious to be talking about 2 different things.

I hear a lot these days about how God is love. That is true. 1 John 4:8 says that exact thing: God is love. 100%. It was one of the first verses I can remember learning. In Kindergarten I learned a short verse for each letter of the alphabet – G: God is love. 1 John 4:8. Got it. But, people say this – you keep saying this and I do not think this means what you think it means... and they think it means God loves us so much that we can just carry on doing whatever we want and not worry about it and you don't need to worry about it either and right and wrong aren't really things – cause God is love. And, love is good and love is love and everything is love so it's all cool. Because love is all there is and love means never having to say you're sorry – is that a movie? So just love. And, maybe you've also seen, read, heard, been told this same sentiment. The result is we can get really messy and confusing ideas about what it means that God is love. But, 1 John 4:9 says that God showed His love by sending Jesus and 1 John 4:10 says Jesus is the atoning sacrifice for our sins. I hate when love, sins, sacrifice, atoning, and death end up in the same sentence. Cause then I'm not

entirely sure what it means that God is love. All I know is that it's definitely true and it's definitely in the Bible. But, what does it mean that God is love? What does it mean that love is part of God's nature? What does God's love look like? And what does it look like to experience God's love? Well, I'm so glad you asked because I so want to tell you. This morning's message is really simple. There's nothing worth reposting or tweeting. It doesn't get any more basic than what I'm going to share this morning. But, sometimes I just need a really simple reminder of how much God loves me and I thought you might too. I've shared from this passage before on a Wednesday night so there are some in here who might find my words familiar but they comfort me every time I read them. Hosea 11 is where we'll begin because I love the Old Testament prophets and Hosea is one of my favorites.

Hosea is a prophet in Israel during the reign of King Jeroboam II – both of the Jeroboam's are evil so they feel interchangeable, but they aren't. However, the king doesn't get a mention in today's story so don't worry about it. Hosea was also a contemporary of the prophet Amos and both of them preach and prophecy about coming judgment from God due to Israel's complete disobedience to God's word and their worship of the baals, which were false gods. The people of Israel had been warned repeatedly – as in over and over again – to repent and return to the Lord or judgment would come. They failed to take that warning to heart, they would not truly repent and now it seems they are marching full force toward captivity by the Assyrians. In the book of Hosea we get a picture of how God feels – He is saddened by Israel's rejection of Him and His heart is broken because of Israel's actions. This heartbreak over Israel choosing to love another is most famously depicted in the first 3 chapters of the book as Hosea literally takes a sinful woman as his wife to illustrate the sin and adultery Israel has committed against God. There is a lot of imagery in the Old Testament about Israel being a wife to God so I feel like most people are familiar with that language. But, in Hosea chapter 11, he paints a picture of the relationship between Israel and God as a child and a parent.

It's a beautiful, heart wrenching chapter, and we'll make our way through it this morning. In so doing we begin to understand just what God's love for His people truly looks like. In the first 2 verses we see God's love looks like **Freedom**.

“When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. But the more I called Israel, the further they went from me. They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images.” Hosea 11:1-2

After 430 years of slavery God had brought His people out of Egypt in the exodus recorded in Exodus 12. God essentially redeemed His people from the hand of the Pharaoh and through Moses we hear that Israel is God’s “firstborn son.” (Exodus 4:22) God freed them with a “mighty hand and an outstretched arm.” (Deuteronomy 5:15) God’s love for them freed them from captivity. Yet, after they had been freed, they returned to slavery of a different kind. This time to false gods, the baals. God had freed them and His desire was that they would use that freedom to willingly worship Him. To live in response to what He had done in freeing them and to worship in response to that freedom. But, instead they had refused and turned away going further and further away from the One who had loved them so much He had freed them and instead sought to worship something that would only lead them to new captivity and new pain and eventual destruction.

Then we see God’s love look like **Tender Care** as we read: **“It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realize it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love. To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them.” Hosea 11:3-4** From the beginning God showed such tender care for His children. Much as a parent would care for their own child – teaching them to walk, picking them up when they fell, healing their wounds, leading them through life, directing their steps, easing their pain, feeding them – these are the images the prophet uses to show the level of care and watchfulness God had for His people. God is love – and oh how He cared for His people.

But, God’s love also looked like **Justice**. The next verses say, **“Will they not return to Egypt and will not Assyria rule over them because they refuse to repent? A sword will flash in their cities; it will devour their false prophets and put an end to their plans. My people are determined to turn from me. Even though they call me God Most High, I will by no means exalt them.” Hosea 11:5-7** The emotion begins to turn here. You can feel the anger and the frustration, the pain and heartbreak – His beloved little child has become the rebellious older teenager or young adult. God had delivered them from bondage, but was now watching them willfully choose to return to captivity just with

a new captor. Even though God cared so deeply for His people when they refused to follow Him He had no choice but to act on His promise. You see at the giving of the law to Moses God had spelled out both blessings and curses. In Deuteronomy 28, Moses had explained what would happen if the people turned away from God and that included being taken into captivity by a foreign nation. It's terrible, awful stuff. I mean if you want to have a horrible afternoon go home today and read Deuteronomy 28. It will for sure ruin your day. But, to sum up, if the people disobeyed they would be cursed, there would be judgment, they would be devoured by other nations, and finally he says, **"Then the Lord will scatter you among all nations, from one end of the earth to the other. There you will worship other gods—gods of wood and stone, which neither you nor your ancestors have known. Among those nations you will find no repose, no resting place for the sole of your foot. There the Lord will give you an anxious mind, eyes weary with longing, and a despairing heart. You will live in constant suspense, filled with dread both night and day, never sure of your life. In the morning you will say, "If only it were evening!" and in the evening, "If only it were morning!"—because of the terror that will fill your hearts and the sights that your eyes will see. The Lord will send you back in ships to Egypt on a journey I said you should never make again. There you will offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but no one will buy you."** Deuteronomy 28:64-68 I told you it was bad. God had said this would happen if they disobeyed. He had given them chance after chance to repent. They had not, and, now here in Hosea 11 it says Assyria will be their ruler and they will be devoured. But, God is in fact a God of **Love**. So then He says through Hosea, **"How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I treat you like Admah? How can I make you like Zeboyim? My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I devastate Ephraim again. For I am God, and not a man—the Holy One among you. I will not come against their cities."** Hosea 11:8-9 God begins in verse 8 to give a glimpse of the pain in His heart as a result of His people turning away. "How can I give you up?" "How can I hand you over?" are the questions He begins to ask. How can I treat you like Admah and Zeboiim? These were two lesser-known cities than Sodom and Gomorrah but they were destroyed at the same

time. So, God is saying, how can I treat you the same as these other sinful cities and wipe you from the earth?

God is love, as we've stated, but here's the thing that is not the same as God loves. It's who He is but it is also what He does. He is love. It's His very nature. It wasn't just that God loved them more than the other nations it was God being God. That love, the very center of who He is prevented Him from completely destroying His people as He did these other cities He names. God couldn't do it. He couldn't hand them over and have them destroyed. He relents as a result indicating that He is not a man, but a Holy God who cannot change His nature. God mourns over Israel and His heart is moved with compassion and such tenderness. God is love but He also loves and it's on full display here in this chapter.

This is when we also see that God's love looks like **Mercy. "They will follow the Lord; he will roar like a lion. When he roars, his children will come trembling from the west. They will come from Egypt, trembling like sparrows, from Assyria, fluttering like doves. I will settle them in their homes," declares the Lord." Hosea 11:10-11** So much mercy. Now to be clear they're still going to be handed over to Assyria. They're still going to be exiled and punished, but instead of destruction mercy will be extended. There will still be punishment because God is both merciful and just. Remember that His love sometimes looks like justice being served. Soong-Chan Rah, in a book called Prophetic Lament, said, **"This judgment is justified. In fact, it is actually a fulfillment of God's promises, revealing his faithfulness. God's integrity in enacting proper judgment should lead to the recognition that his integrity will also be evidenced in the process of restoration....If God stays true to his character, he has to judge unrighteousness and injustice because he takes sin seriously. And because God is faithful in bringing judgment upon Israel's disobedience, there is also certainty to God's redemption."**

Soong-Chan Rah

So, in His mercy, God will once again call out to His children as a lion roars for its cubs. This time – in the future – they will return to Him from all the places God had scattered them as a result of their sin. In the Chronicles of Narnia, C. S. Lewis writes of Aslan, "At the sound of his roar sorrows will be no more." When God roars and calls His children to return to Him the sorrows of exile will be gone as mercy restores them to their home. The days of captivity will end and there will be a day of restoration for them.

The nature of God and His love for His people is seen in the freedom He gave them, in His tender care of them, in His just and merciful dealings, and in His great love towards them. The story of His people continues, and we know from the rest of the Old Testament that all of this came to pass. They were exiled to Assyria as punishment for their sins and then after 70 years some of them began to return.

But, what had not changed was the need for a way for both justice to be served and mercy extended and love to be on display in an even greater way. So, God showed His love for us through Jesus.

Freedom - Once again we see God call His son out of Egypt in Matthew 2. Matthew wants us to see that Jesus is the Son of God who will obey His Father's commands. After Jesus' birth Mary and Joseph take Jesus to Egypt while running for their lives from Herod. When they return Matthew sees it as Jesus fulfilling every part of Scripture so he quotes from Hosea 11 saying, **"And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet, Out of Egypt I called my Son."** **Matthew 2:15** But this time the son was the One and Only Son, Jesus, who pointed everyone to the Father and not to idols.

Tender Care - God shows His tender care for His Son in His pronouncement, **"You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."** **Luke 3:22** You can feel the pride and joy He has in His Son as He speaks this from heaven.

Justice - was satisfied for all the sins committed against the Father as Jesus took our punishment. **"He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed."** **1 Peter 2:24**

Love - With Israel God's love was such that He could not give them up, but with Jesus the love of God was on display in that He did give His son up. **"He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all."** **Romans 8:32** He sent Jesus to earth to live as a sinless man to be our perfect sacrifice. He gave His son to be sin for us. This time the full wrath of God was laid on Jesus. He held nothing back and relented not at all.

Mercy - Through Jesus the mercy of God extends to the west and the east, the north and the south. Through Jesus that mercy is extended to all of us and allows for all of us to hear the call to return to the Lord. **"A great multitude that no one could count from every nation, tribe, people and language standing before the throne."** **"And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."** **Revelation 7:9, 17**

This is why when we read the fuller portion of 1 John 4 we get this very picture of God's love through Jesus. **"God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."** 1 John 4:8-10

God's love is not a love that sets us free to live anyway that we want. His love does not excuse our sin or let it remain. His love does not come without correction or discipline or punishment. For His love and mercy are coupled with justice. But, God's love is so much greater because God's love and mercy means that while He does not and cannot look away from our sin He can forgive our sin! He can take away our sin and as the Psalmist says He can take it as far from us as the east is from the west. He can through Jesus say that justice has been served, mercy has been applied, freedom from sin has been granted, love has been lavished upon us, and now life to the full has been offered. This is love!

What does it look like for you and me to experience the true love of God?

Freedom. Jesus calls out to us today to release us from bondage and set us free. It's what He came to do! **"To proclaim freedom for the captives, and release from darkness for the prisoners."** Isaiah 61:1 The Apostle Paul would say it this way, **"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery."** Galatians 5:1 We've been set free by Jesus and called out of bondage and slavery to sin. Don't return to it! Keep growing closer and closer to Jesus in your new life of freedom. The incredible thing about God's love is it frees us from sin and frees us to live our lives in response to that freedom. I say it all the time: Jesus saved us and now we live in response to what He has done. We can live for Jesus because we're free to do so!

Tender care. We experience God's love for us through His tender care. Just as God cared for Israel as a parent cares for a child so God cares for us. He is gracious to us patiently leading us and guiding us as new and young believers. God shows His tender care for us even in His discipline of us – **"The Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son."** Hebrews 12:6 Perhaps you've always felt God was angry at your or just someone creating rules that you couldn't keep – but actually, God is a loving

Father who cares so deeply for you. He is so attentive to your needs. His love for you looks like tenderness and compassion and the love of a good Father.

Justice. When we choose to disobey and return to the sin from which God has freed us through Jesus there are consequences to that decision. God is a just God and He will not wink at your sin. But, oh how His heart is broken when you turn away from Him and pursue your own way.

Love. God, who at the thought of giving up His son, Israel, felt His heart break, was willing to give up His Son, Jesus, for you. This holy God has such compassion towards you today. So much love for you. **“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” John 3:16**

Mercy. God is calling out to you today with another chance to return to Him and experience freedom through Jesus, the tender care of the Father, the love of God. **“He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.” Psalm 103:10** He longs to be merciful to you and to restore you.

God’s love for us is so big and so deep. *Like the church at Ephesus* sometimes it’s hard to comprehend the breadth and width and length and depth of the love God has for us and the distance He was willing to go to be in relationship with us – sending His own Son to die for our sins. Hosea paints such a beautiful picture that was an encouragement to His people that though punishment was coming God still loved them and would extend mercy that would bring them home. When we add in the knowledge of Jesus being the Son who when called out of Egypt grew in favor with God and man, who was loved and cared for by the Father, who took the wrath of God even as God’s heart broke, so that now the Lion of the tribe of Judah roars for His children – well, now it gets exciting. When He roars His children from every tribe, every nation will come trembling before Him and at His name every knee bows and every tongue confesses. This morning Jesus is extending freedom to you, tender love as He invites you to come and cast all your cares at His feet. Jesus has taken your place so that justice is served and you can experience the love and mercy He has for you.

God is love and His love is best understood through what Jesus has done for you and it’s best experienced when we leave behind the sins we once committed and instead live in the freedom we find in Christ and then live in response to that. Jesus died for me to set me free from sin so my response is to live a life that honors Him.

So now that you understand and we're on the same page about what is meant when the Bible says God is love what will you do with that knowledge? Maybe someone needs to respond to the freedom from sin and the mercy of forgiveness that is on offer. Maybe others just needed to be reminded today God truly cares for you and watches over you. You just needed that tiny piece of this message to wash over you – how intimately and tenderly God cares for you. Maybe others need to respond to this message by re-committing themselves to live in response to God's love daily in your actions, your words, even your worship. You died for me, Jesus, I'll live for you. I'll worship you. I'll honor you.

This simple sermon today can be summed up in this last sentence – You are so loved and cared for by God that He sent His own Son to die for you that you could know freedom and mercy and so much love now and forever.

Let's Pray.