

Two-Pronged Love  
Hosea 11:1-9; Mark 10:13-14

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Our Old Testament lesson this morning is an interesting text. Part of it is clearly fond remembrance. God recalls freeing the Israelites from their enslavement in Egypt. God remembers caring for them in their wilderness wandering as a proud parent remembers a small child. Teaching your child to walk, lifting her up in your arms, bending down to give him a snack. It's very poignant. Israel a small child; God a loving, dotting parent. Very moving.

But the text is not just about love. It's also a lament. Despite God's loving, tender care, Israel has turned out badly. They've wandered away from the God who loves them so much: sacrificing to Baal, offering incense to idols. God loves them but God is also very distressed, heartbroken.

Finally, our text is about resolve. God has every right, but God will not destroy Israel. God is not driven by revenge. God will not smite the people or reduce their towns to rubble. God will not destroy the Israelites. In fact, God recoils from the very idea.

It's a lovely passage and I'm sure the people who first heard these words were very moved by them, very comforted.

As Christians, we know these words are not trapped in time, nor limited to just one people. As Christians, we know these words are also God's message to us. This is how much God loves us.

When we bow down and worship the Baal of power, the Baal of prestige, the Baal of ego and having the most important job and the most successful children and being busier than anyone

else (because we all know being busy makes us important), when we bow down to these Baals, God still loves us.

When we pretend to ourselves we are giving God our best, but in reality we are giving God our left-overs – our left-over time, our left-over money, our left-over energy - God knows what we're doing. God is not fooled. And yet, God loves us anyway. Clearly, God loves us even when we are disappointing.

Not having any children, I don't know what it's like to love a disappointing child. But I do know a lot of parents and I've heard all about children disappointing them. I've listened to a father lamenting his son being in jail for drugs. He hired a lawyer, even though he knew his son wouldn't appreciate it. "But what can I do? He's my son." I've sat in a church fellowship hall listening to a couple recounting how their son went to a local strip club, got in a fight, broke the bouncer's arm, and was being sued for it. I remember sitting in a lady's living room as she told me about her son who is serving a life sentence for murder.

I hasten to point out all of these were long ago and far away. Trust me, you don't know any of them. And for the record, women can be just as disappointing as men. They do it differently, but women can be just as disappointing as men.

What struck me, though, what I remember best, was the parents. They all had that same wistful tone. That same sound of love and lament. They knew their children had done wrong. Badly. But they loved them and were determined to keep on loving them.

God's love for us, God's love for you and me, is even greater than those parents' love for their children. God's love for us is greater than any human love. God has the power to destroy us for our sins, but God chooses not to.

We could stop right here. Call it a day. It's a good, logical place to end. God chooses to love us, despite our many sins. But there's more to God's love than this. There's another aspect to God's love we should remember.

In our New Testament lesson, people are bringing little children to Jesus: newborns up to age 4 or 5. Children small enough to pick up and hold in your arms.

I don't have children, but I know a lot of parents and I've heard all about children at that age. Something they all seem to do is love on anyone. A small child will hug just about anyone.

My mother-in-law enjoys telling the story of being in worship one day when they were recognizing the women in the church. The children were going to pass out flowers to the women. Each child was supposed to take one flower, just one, and give it to a random woman. Some small child gave my mother-in-law a flower and then he went back, got another flower, and gave it to her. Then he ran back and brought flowers to all the women in the pew. He couldn't stop. Loving was too much fun.

Children at that age don't discriminate. They just love. They reach out and love.

This is how God loves us. God doesn't discriminate. God just reaches out and loves. God loves us as freely as small children love on total strangers.

Friends, have you ever wondered if God really loves us? Does God really love us? When we call ourselves Christians but in reality we're chasing after every false God we can find, does God still love us?

Yes. Yes. God loves us with the mature, clear-eyed love of a wise and caring parent. God loves us with the joyful exuberance of a small child.

Beloved, this is how much God loves us. Thanks be to God. Amen!