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To Have Without Holding: The Prophets and Biblical Authority

The first half of my title for this morning comes from a Marge Piercy poem, and with it I begin.

To Have Without Holding

Learning to love differently is hard,
love with the hands wide open, love
with the doors banging on their hinges,
the cupboard unlocked, the wind
roaring and whimpering in the rooms
rustling the sheets and snapping the blinds
that thwack like rubber bands
in an open palm.

It hurts to love wide open
stretching the muscles that feel
as if they are made of wet plaster,
then of blunt knives, then
of sharp knives.

It hurts to thwart the reflexes
of grab, of clutch; to love and let
go again and again. It pesters to remember
the lover who is not in the bed,
to hold back what is owed to the work
that gutters like a candle in a cave
without air, to love consciously,
conscientiously, concretely, constructively.

I can't do it, you say it's killing
me, but you thrive, you glow
on the street like a neon raspberry,
You float and sail, a helium balloon
bright bachelor's button blue and bobbing
on the cold and hot winds of our breath,
as we make and unmake in passionate
diastole and systole the rhythm
of our unbound bonding, to have
and not to hold, to love
with minimized malice, hunger
and anger moment by moment balanced.

"To thwart the reflexes of grab, of clutch; to love and let go again and again."

Learning to love like that is hard, whether it is loving a partner without controlling or hemming in; loving a child in ways that allow her to forge her own way; or loving a parent for who she is and not who you wish she had been or has come to be.

Learning to love like that is hard, but most of us know, from experience, that the alternative is worse. That trying to love too tightly, with too many boundaries or expectations, deadens rather than enlivens—that instead of sailing like a helium balloon bright bachelor's button blue we squeeze the air, the life, out of ourselves and those we seek to love well.

II

These insights into human love might prove helpful as we think about a different kind of relationship—the relationship that Christians have with Scripture, especially the Old Testament—and about how we witness to that relationship in our preaching and teaching.

You will notice that I call these scriptures the Old Testament, unlike many in the church and academy who have gravitated to the seemingly-less-offensive title Hebrew Scriptures or Hebrew Bible. In keeping the name that the church has given these documents, I do not deny the anti-Jewish history of this label or that of the church itself. Indeed, a key commitment that I bring to my life and my work is combating anti-Judaism in church and society. And yet, I have found no other term for this collection that solves the problem without creating others. There are, of course, the problems of accuracy: few Christians read these books in the Hebrew language, and the Roman Catholic canon includes books whose "original language" seems to be Greek. But, even more importantly, dialogue between Christians and Jews is not served when we minimize that the differences in how we read these texts: differences between reading them

alongside the New Testament and alongside the Talmud; differences between reading them in light of Lent and in light of Yom Kippur; differences between reading them outside of a ghetto and inside of one. Even as I resist much of the church's interpretation of these texts, to suggest that I read them unaffected by the contours of my tradition would prevent me from being honest with myself and with my Jewish neighbors. You may disagree with my choice to keep this old title, but please know that it comes from an attempt to speak the truth about the books themselves and the communities that read them.

Our interpretative history matters. In fact, I have become convinced that a key reason Christians struggle so much with the Old Testament is because of what the church has told them to expect from their encounter with it. Christians expect the Bible as a whole to tell them how to live well, to provide detailed instructions or at least general principles for how to live a life pleasing to God and in harmony with others. When those expectations bump up against aspects of Old Testament texts—and New Testament ones as well—Christian readers are left bewildered, often paralyzed. How can a Bible which aims to teach me love of God and neighbor, relish violence, denigrate women, and advocate brutal punishment for children? If preaching is supposed to be the offering of Good News, what in the world do we do when the text in front of us looks seems to offer nothing but very bad news?

My thesis this morning is that this problem resides less in these texts than in our expectations of them. That in professing our love of and undying obedience to the Bible we have bound it so tightly that can see only where it fails us. That learning to love the Bible differently, thwarting the reflexes of grab and of clutch, might not kill us but help us to thrive.

III

I want to explore this thesis by way of a case study. I take up the difficulty that Christians in general—and Christian preachers—have in interpreting the prophetic books of the Old Testament, Isaiah through Malachi.

It would be hard to overstate just how much weight the church throughout its history has given to the prophetic books. The story begins with the New Testament itself. As a rash of scholarly publication is now cataloging, New Testament writers drew heavily on a wide array of Israel's scriptures. But most often, these writers insist that Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection were all as God "spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old" (to quote from Luke 1). Among the prophets, Isaiah takes pride of place: the New Testament quotes, paraphrases, or alludes to Isaiah over four hundred times. The prophets are good news, according to the New Testament, because they witness to Jesus, the ultimate good news.

The New Testament's interpretation of the prophets continued and developed in the patristic and medieval periods. Increasingly the church read all Scripture (Genesis as well as Isaiah) as predictive of Jesus and of the emerging doctrine and practice of the church. But the prophets continued to be the church's primary well from which to draw. In these eras, Isaiah was understood to testify not only to the events of Jesus' life, but also to Mary's perpetual virginity, her own Immaculate Conception, and her Assumption into heaven. Isaiah was for Tertullian the "fifth gospel," foretelling all that would come to be.

Patristic and medieval writers did chafe at some of what scripture had to say. Origen admitted that if he had to read Leviticus literally, he would have to rethink some of his understandings of God. But, of course, neither Origen or other interpreters of the era had to read literally. Equipped with the interpretive strategy of reading scripture on multiple levels—symbolically, allegorically, and spiritually in addition to the plain sense—they were able to find good news in even the most difficult of passages. Worried about Psalm 137's desire to bash babies against a rock? Not Origen, who preached that what the text was really talking about was dashing the passions against the hard test of reason. Scripture always bears good news, even when it is not immediately evident. But even those in the Middle Ages who rejected allegorical readings always managed to find good news in the prophets. Amazingly, even their literal, plain sense readings all continued to point forward to Jesus.

The Protestant Reformation is often seen as making a decisive break with the previous interpretative traditions of the church—placing a new emphasis on the plain sense of scripture and its accessibility to all readers. Luther and Calvin read Hebrew and Greek; they consulted Jewish commentators. And yet both continued to understand Scripture as witnessing to the Incarnation and as authorizing Christian doctrine. For example, Luther agreed with humanist interpreters that, based on careful study of Hebrew, ‘almah in Isa 7:14 means "young woman," so that the church's traditional translation "a virgin shall conceive" is inaccurate. But Luther also argued that for the event to have been a miracle the "young woman" must have been a virgin.

Similarly, Calvin was much more willing to talk about the historical situation of individual prophets and to understand what they said to their own time. But he never ceased stressing the christological dimension of prophets. The young woman in Isa 7 may have referred

to a woman living during Isaiah's time period, he claimed, but it also clearly refers to Mary's conception of Jesus.

In retrospect, the interpretive strategies of the Reformers left less of an impact on the church than did their views on the role of the Bible in the life of the believer. The Bible became the only rule of faith and practice. It is understood to speak directly to the believer, unmediated by church tradition, with a meaning that is not esoteric but clear. Moreoever, Calvin is especially clear that the Old and New Testaments bear a consistent witness: both say the same thing and bear witness to the same truths about God, even as the New reveals that truth in greater clarity and detail.

The history that I have so far described is not simply important for understanding the church's past. The main themes of this interpretation remain very much alive in contemporary Christian settings. Every single Advent, the Revised Common Lectionary instructs the church to read the prophets: In year A, we read First Isaiah; in year B, we read Second Isaiah; in year C we read a miscellany of prophets. In our hymns, we sing Isaiah's words as if they are spoken to Jesus: O Come, O come Immanuel; Come Thou Long Expected Jesus. Throughout the year, we pair Old and New Testament readings; and we study these books never doubting that there is good news to be found. The history of the church does not remain in the past.

But this is not the only history we bring to our reading and our preaching of the prophets. There is also the legacy of the academic study of prophets for the past 300 years. By the late eighteenth century, intellectuals were employing an approach to Scripture sometimes called the scientific study of Bible or historical criticism. They insisted that the Bible was written, transmitted, and read by humans and should be read in the same way as any other human book.

Prophetic books, therefore, surely do not predict the future, but rather record the speeches of great men to their contemporaries. New emphasis turned to the personalities of the prophets, their individual genius. Prophets became preachers.

For an important strain of historical criticism, what the prophets preached was ethical monotheism—a profound insistence that there is only one God and that that God demanded a high standard of behavior from all followers. Prophets were courageous men who challenged the religious establishment, both of the neighboring Canaanites and also of Israelite religion itself. Spiritual and moral rather than the legalistic and ritualistic, the prophets stood towered like moral giants over their contemporaries.

Historical critics elevated the prophets above the rest of the Old Testament canon. The moral injunctions of Amos and Micah, the biting critique of Isaiah and Jeremiah, far more than the Pentateuch or the historical books, trumpeted what would culminate in Christianity. By the early 20th c, "prophetic" no longer meant "predictive" but "morally challenging, courageously ethical."

Surely this legacy lives on. It lives on in scholars, as Walter Brueggemann claims that Jesus' ministry was prophetic, as the contemporary Christian's should be, and M. Daniel Carroll connects Amos with the struggles for justice in Latin America. It lives on in widely-known sermons of Martin Luther King, Jr., who in his "I Have a Dream Speech," quoted directly from the book of Amos to demand that "justice roll down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream." It lives on in the dominant discourse of the UCC and other liberal bodies who talk about "prophetic preaching" and "prophetic action: and who adopt as their own the credo of Micah: "what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Should you have drifted off during this history lesson, let me invite you to hear the point have been attempting to make. It is this: that the church has placed the prophets on an exalted pedestal. We have been told these books prove that Jesus is the Messiah and/or that they mark the pinnacle of truth and justice in the Old Testament. Whether we are aware of that history or not, everything about our tradition tells us that the goal of the preacher is to help us to see how wonderfully important and valuable these books truly are.

IV

With those expectations on the table, pity the poor preacher who has actually read the prophetic books and who strives to bear witness to all that she finds there. Pity especially the poor preacher aware of the harsh critique of the prophets leveled by recent interpreters of these books.

The list is of accusations is long. The prophets use females as the symbols for everything that is bad about ancient Israel and its neighbors. They talk about children owing parents full obedience to the point of violent punishment. And, related to both, they all too often celebrate violence. Almost to a one, the prophets of the Old Testament report that God does or will act violently against those that displease God. There are, indeed, beautiful statements about peace in the prophets, but much more frequent are the images of bloodshed and war.

Critique of the prophets is nowhere more scathing than in the work of feminist interpreters over the past 3 decades. And no prophet escapes notice. For example, while the first edition of *A Feminist Companion to the Latter Prophets* (1995) focused primarily on Hosea, the second series (2001) extended feminist analysis to Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, Malachi, Nahum, and Daniel. Similarly, all but 2 treatments of the prophetic books in *The Women's Bible Commentary* object to prophetic descriptions of women. A growing number of monographs, commentaries and articles thoughtfully and directly make the feminist case against the prophets.

1. Despite their low social status in the ancient world and their inability to own property, women receive a disproportionate amount of blame in the prophetic books for the nations' sins. Amos 4 calls the wealthy women of Samaria "cows of Bashan" and announces that, like cattle, they will be led to slaughter. Feminist Cheryl Exum, however, wonders where property-less women got those possessions.
2. Women do not function in independent agents in the prophetic books. Women are victims of rape (Zec 14:2) and violence (Hos 13:16). When women are described as self-supporting, the context is one of humiliation. Even when the prophets speak sympathetically of women, they are almost always victims: they are grieving, barren, and lamenting (Isa 32:9-14; Jer 9:20).

3. But, as depressing as the fate of real women in the prophetic literature may be, more striking (and of greater interest to feminists) is the prophetic use of female metaphors. Repeatedly, cities, countries, behaviors, and attitudes appear in a woman's dress. Extending far beyond the use of feminine pronouns, the prophetic books elaborately compare cities to

daughters who are dependent on male saviors and cities/countries to whores who flaunt their sexuality and who deserve (and receive) violent punishment, often sexual in nature.

The prophetic comparison of Israel/ Judah to a wife has drawn the most consistent and scathing feminist criticism. This "marriage metaphor," in which the relationship between Yahweh and the nation is compared to that between a man and a woman, runs throughout the prophetic books. It is explicit in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and perhaps implicit in other books such as Malachi, though its fullest articulation is found in the early chapters of Hosea.

In Hosea 1-3, the prophet is instructed to marry an unfaithful woman, not because he loves her or in order to turn her life around, but rather to make a point: Israel, like the woman, has been unfaithful. After Hosea takes Gomer as wife, he then is instructed to treat her as God is about to treat Israel. Gomer-as-Israel is called a whore, and the names given her children are those of rejection—Not Pitied, Not my People. Hosea 2 turns to threats against this woman-as-Israel: the prophet-as-God warns

> I will strip her naked
>
> And expose her as in the day she was born,
>
> And make her like a wilderness,
>
> And turn her into a parched land,
>
> And kill her with thirst. (2:3, NRSV)

The children themselves will receive no pity, and the wife will find no escape from the punishment she deserves. Her many lovers offer no refuge, but her husband "will uncover her shame in the sight of her lovers" (2:10).

In Hos 2:14, the tone of the husband turns tender. Words like "allure" and "tenderly" replace his earlier rage. This "second honeymoon" witnesses the reunion of husband and the wife and the father's reclaiming of the children.

But feminists have not been won over by this apparent change of charge at the end of Hosea 2. Rather, they see Hosea 1-2, from beginning to end, as demeaning to and dangerous for women. The metaphor equates God with the male. It gives divine sanction to male hierarchy in relationships, particularly marriage. It reinforces the mentality of domestic battering, not only in its assumption that a jealous husband is justified in physical punishment of his wife, but also in its inclusion of an appeal to make-up after the damage has been done. When viewed in light of the classic pattern of spousal abuse, this new period of romance is a predictable stage in a perpetual cycle of jealousy and violence. Harsh words have been used for Hosea. In 1985, Drorah Setel called it "pornography," and in the 1990's Athalya Brenner coined the catchy and damning term "pornoprophetics."

The chasm between what we have been taught to expect from the prophets and what feminists find within them gapes before us. The prophets, our traditions have told us, champion justice; but, justice for women in the prophets is certainly hard to see. The prophets, our traditions have told us, stood against—and ethically above—their culture; but, the patriarchal assumptions that animate these texts are sadly common to cultures of multiple times and places. The prophets, our traditions have told us, were moral giants who revealed to us a good God and instructed us about how to treat one another well; but, neither the deity this book portrays nor the prophet whose name it bears provide positive role models for those who care about the well-being of women.

It should not surprise us that most interpreters peering into that chasm between tradition and feminist critique back quickly away, back to the relative safety of one standing place or the other, perhaps nodding occasionally to the other side. Contemporary discourse about the prophets, I find, is highly polarized. Prophets are either seen as powerful voices for justice, Christian in some sense of the term, or they are irredeemably misogynistic. I see this polarization in the scholarly community, in classrooms, and in sermons. Either the prophets are resources for faithful living or they become the face of all that is wrong about church and society. To be fair, some attempts have been made to bridge these two perspectives, but, in my opinion, few have been successful in taking seriously the depth of the feminist critique of the prophets.

Valuing the prophets and taking their ethical difficulties seriously. Is it possible to do both? What can a preacher say, with integrity, about the prophets?

V

Perhaps you think I have spent too much time on describing the problem we face and have left too little time to answer it. Perhaps you are right.

But, in my own journey, it was the careful analysis of the problem that led me to believe that we struggle less with these texts than of with expectations of them. Clearly, to return to Marge Piercy's words, we have held the prophets so tightly, with fists so tightly closed, that neither we nor they can breathe.

As long as we demand that the prophets, that the Bible as a whole, must serve as authoritative instructions on how to love God and neighbor, then we will remain unable to take seriously all of what they say. We will be stuck with either accepting that authority (and

minimizing in any way that we can the difficulties of their language) or in denying that these books have any value in them whatsoever. As long as the only question on the table is "will you accept the authority of these books over your life?," then the only possible responses are "yes" or "no."

What would happen instead, if we asked a different question of the Bible, the question of how do these texts, including our critique of them, enable us to think more clearly about ourselves and the world in which we live? How are the complications in this text also complications within me and in my culture? How do I see the politics of my own situation in the politics of the text?

I can testify that the Bible can life-changing in that way. That it works on those who engage it deeply. I know that to be true in my own private interactions with the text, in that of my students, and in that of members of congregations.

1. *In the case of Hosea, one way that this often happens is that in confronting the patriarchy of this text readers come to understand at a deeper level the patriarchy in their own cultures, and the patriarchy socialized into all of us.*

In the classroom and in churches, the majority of readers cannot see the patriarchy in the text until it is painstakingly pointed out to them. When confronted with the feminist critique of Hosea, some are shocked not to have noticed these features before; but even more struggle to comprehend even the basic dynamics of patriarchal ideology in this text. The difficulty that some people have in seeing patriarchy in Hosea comes from their difficulty in seeing patriarchy in their own culture, and from their difficulty in acknowledging that their own "gut" responses are shaped by presumptions of male privilege.

I have lost count of how many students, hearing familiar patterns of relationship called "sexist" or "abusive" invites a reconsideration of their own lives. It invites them, too, to reflect on the sheer power of patriarchal ideology—in their culture and in themselves. When the author of Hosea sought to convince ancient readers of the legitimacy of God's punishment of Israel, he found an easily-usable cultural analogy: patriarchally-framed marriage. Why does that analogy continue to be so effective for many people? Why, in the past and in the present, is gender such a highly effective means to describe hierarchies of power?

2. *The critique also helps us own up to the often uncontested power of culture's scripts for romance.*

It would be difficult to overstate just how strongly notions of romance factor in contemporary understandings of marriage in the United States. This is a society that insists that people should only marry if they are in love and coaches men how to make romantic proposals of marriage. Most Americans believe, too, that romance within marriage can and should be life-long. Should the spark of romance go out, magazine articles, TV shows, the internet, couples seminars, flower shops, and whole malls sell remedies to rekindle the flame. Partners who do not love one another any more, who are "stuck in a loveless marriage," are seen as prime candidates for divorce or at least pity. Given how romance-saturated contemporary pictures of marriage are, it is little wonder that readers are taken by—and actually help create--Hosea's expression of love. Despite all that Hosea's metaphor involves, seeing only love in Hosea becomes easy, given what many of us are taught about marriage from an early age.

Viewing Hos 1-2 through the lens of romance also allows the modern reader to minimize the threats of violence in chapter 2 as "natural" anger in response to marital infidelity. While feminist critique suggests that the two halves of chapter 2—the threats and the honeymoon—are two dimensions of male control, "hopeless romantics" understand the two divine emotions as two dimensions of romance: because God/the prophet loves Israel/Gomer, he erupts in anger when she betrays him with another. The threats arise from the same passion as the coos of love.

Such a depiction, of course, follows particular gender scripts. The male responds to betrayal with rage, although the female's feelings about being abandoned by her lovers and stripped by her husband

receive no attention. The male does not respond with other "understandable" emotions: sadness, grief, or depression in response to loss. Readers socialized into patriarchal ideologies of marriage and romance do not register surprise at these features of the text because they have learned to expect men lash out in anger against affronts to their honor and refusals of their affections. The scripts are not just those of Hosea, but also of movies like *Unfaithful* in which a couple find new intimacy after the husband murders his wife's lover in jealous rage.

Feminist criticism offers an opportunity to look at the structures of our thinking. Why are modern notions of romantic marriage so powerful that readers will find them in Hosea, despite their absence in the text? Why are readers so insistent on finding stories in which love triumphs over all and relationships weather the storms of betrayal and anger? Why do they like to see men woo women, to be a little jealous, maybe to exert just a little force? Why are these scripts so powerful that they can fuel not only the wedding industry but also the reading of biblical texts?

3. *Especially for the church, Hosea painfully shows us that the masculinity of God is intertwined with human dynamics of power.*

The patriarchy of Hosea is not a layer of meaning that can be stripped away from this text. The text depends upon it to work. Its author seeks to convince readers that Israel owes Yahweh not only affection but also obedience, that Israel deserves punishment for attachments to other deities, and that after the punishment Yahweh might again choose Israel. The vehicle for those claims is a metaphor in which one party holds power and privilege over another, in which one stands as the unquestioned superior. In the world of this text, God and Israel are not equal partners in a mutually-chosen relationship; neither are men and women. To gender-switch the metaphor, to make God female and God male, would change its meaning. To frame the marriage as one of equals changes its message: this is an account of unequal power and justified punishment, not of a mutual exchange of vows and hurt.

Feminist critique calls the church to own up to the patriarchy of the Bible, and to own up to the humanness of the Bible. To return to my theme, it calls us to respond to the Bible with more than "this is the word of the LORD."

This discussion also suggests, however, that only addressing the Bible's patriarchy is insufficient. Because patriarchy also is internalized within readers, it must be addressed in culture as well. Just as recognizing patriarchy within the Bible might make patriarchy in culture more evident, so might greater awareness of the forms that patriarchy takes in their own cultures and psyches allow Christians to see something important, if perhaps painful, about their traditional texts.

Feminist critique challenges Christians to take responsibility for all God language, both the language that inherited from tradition (language which feels right and comfortable) and also any new language forged in attempts to respond faithfully to new insights and sensitivities. What does our God-talk imply about others? About the world? What ideologies does it support? As we have seen, metaphors of human relationships come with particular risks, because they carry the most culturally-specific ideologies; we find it easy, and dangerous, to equate human and divine prerogatives.

It all sounds so heady, so political, so UCC. But, I can also testify that squarely confronting the patriarchy of this text (and others) has allowed me to squarely, even painfully, confront how the patriarchal scripts continue to shape my own spiritual struggles. I speak so ardently as a feminist that sometimes I forget just how deep patriarchal socialization runs in my own psyche. I might not call God Husband, but I still have found myself wanting a dashing God to sweep me off my feet. I might not call God Father, but I still have found myself expecting a divine daddy to make everything all right and fearing that I might displease that parent by not obeying his rules.

In living with the difficult texts of the prophets, I have found that they have worked on me as I have worked on them. They have worked on me not in spite of their problems, but because of my willingness to look those problems—and myself—straight in the eye.

VI

The preaching implications of this approach to the Bible are far-ranging, but perhaps I can encapsulate the task into some advice for preachers:

1. Try to honor all the truths of a text, the painful ones and well as the hopeful ones. Do not shy away from what bothers you, and if you are never bothered by a text then go learn from those who are: read the *Global Bible Commentary*, or the *Women's Bible Commentary, The Queer Bible Commentary*, or any of the important works now available on socially-located readings (especially those of our speakers Jeffrey Kuan and Elyse Goldstein). See the text from someone else's eyes, especially someone very different from yourself.
2. Look for how these truths—all of them--connect with the lived experience of those gathered. Find the points of commonality between the messiness of this text and the messiness of individuals, the messiness of the world, the messiness of the world.
3. Testify to what gives you hope, in the text or outside of it. Show us how paying attention to the text and our lives matters.
4. And trust that God might work through this process, even if in unexpected ways.

Learning to love differently, says Marge Piercy, is hard:

> It hurts to thwart the reflexes
>
> of grab, of clutch; to love and let
>
> go again and again.
>
> You say you can't do it, but
>
> you thrive, you glow
>
> on the street like a neon raspberry,
>
> You float and sail, a helium balloon
>
> bright bachelor's button blue and bobbing
>
> on the cold and hot winds of our breath…

Learning to love the Bible that way is hard, too, but it offers a way to do more than to accept or reject the Bible. Perhaps we can love the Bible as consciously, conscientiously, concretely, constructively as Piercy claims we might love one another. Perhaps instead of killing us, it will allow us to thrive.