

“Doing Faith”

June 7, 2026

Scripture: Hosea 5:15-6:6; Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

What does a nation do when it is faced with imminent disaster from a more powerful country? How should leaders respond to the threat of invasion? That’s the reality Israel faced during Hosea’s time. A large, powerful, juggernaut of an army from the east was bearing down on Israel. The leadership was left with very few options. They could try to form alliances with other nations to fight against it or they could try to appease the enemy and give up their autonomy. Either way they’ll be compromised, and when push comes to shove they’ll be left hung out to dry.

But no matter what choice they make, their efforts will mean using resources that could be used to relieve poverty and homelessness among their own people for tribute to allies or antagonists. When prophets like Hosea point out this neglect of the poor, the monarchy tries to shut them up, like they do with Amos for instance. But Hosea refuses to be silenced. He demonstrates their infidelity by “marrying” a known prostitute as an analogy of the relationship between God and Israel. The children born of that marriage are given symbolic names: Jezreel, which means “God sows;” Lo-ruhamah, which means “Not Pitied;” and Lo-ammi, which means “Not my people.” It’s a strange performance and there is some debate as to whether it actually was done, or if it was more like street theater. But the point is pretty clear. Hosea is saying because Israel has been unfaithful to God what’s produced from their relationship is punishment, mercilessness and rejection.

It’s a stark indictment of Israel for failing to follow Torah and allowing its people to suffer while it pursues relations with other countries in the hope of saving itself. Sacrificing their poor and vulnerable in order to protect their elite is seen as a terrible violation of God’s law. And no amount of ritual and offerings can hide the reality of what’s happening. The monarchy seems to think it can simply fall back on rigid piety to manipulate God and oblige God to protect them. But Hosea presents God as seeing through their charade and insisting on a deeper, more substantial expression of faith.

I’m especially intrigued by how Hosea characterizes God’s attitude toward the people. God is not aloof or indifferent. When God says, “I will return again to my place until they acknowledge their guilt and seek my face,” that’s not a threat to abandon them. God is retreating, pulling back for a time, to see if they’ll come around. God refuses to force them to behave. Faith can’t be forced. It has to come from within if it’s to have any meaning or substance at all. But you notice God isn’t holding out a lot of hope here. When the people are portrayed as responding in words that sound very sincere, when they say, “Let us know, let us press on to know the Lord; his appearing is as sure as the dawn; he will come to us like the showers, like the spring rains that water the earth,” God doesn’t buy it. “Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes away early.” God’s not convinced Israel is reliable.

They want to use offerings and prayers as a substitute for accountability and compassion. When God says, “I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,” what’s meant isn’t self-sacrifice;

what's meant is empty ritual. They're just going through the motions, heaping offerings on the altar but doing nothing to relieve suffering. Steadfast love, what in Hebrew is *hesed*, is all about relieving suffering. It's a primary description for God. In the psalms and the prophets we find God described over and over as "full of mercy and abounding in *hesed*, steadfast love." God does *hesed* and we're called to do it, too.

That's why the calls we're hearing in our country lately for religious renewal sound hollow when they're made alongside disdain for poor and vulnerable people. The claims we hear from people in places of influence that say the reason we have crime or unemployment or homelessness is because refugees and immigrants from non-white countries are allowed to live here are not a reflection of God's steadfast love. They're an attempt to pit us against each other, to look at people who are different because of their gender identity or their religion or their culture with suspicion and fear.

What's even more astounding to me, is our country isn't facing anything like the threat facing Hosea's Israel. Their leaders were truly backed up against a wall. They were caught between two superpowers, Egypt and Assyria. Hosea doesn't let that excuse their neglect of their poor and vulnerable people, but we can at least understand that self-preservation was their main motive. What are we trying to preserve in our country that justifies rejecting decency and fairness? I understand there are people who think they don't have the same kind of advantages their grandparents had because now there are laws prohibiting discrimination based on race or sex, but those laws have made us a stronger, more compassionate society. When I look at our community, here in Buffalo, and how we've benefited from the growth of immigrant and refugee populations, there's no doubt in my mind that diversity makes this a better place to live, that love and acceptance and inclusion is better for everyone than resisting diversity and living in fear.

And the more I read the gospel, the more I'm convinced that's the heart of Jesus' message. Even though our reading skips a few verses in the middle, the point is carried through pretty well. The first controversy Jesus faces is over the kind of company he keeps. He's hanging out with "tax collectors and sinners." Tax collecting was in a special category of sin not because taxes are bad *per se*, but because to be a tax collector meant you were collaborating with the Roman occupiers, and probably getting rich doing it. So when Jesus is confronted about eating meals with them, we can understand why some people might be offended. And basically Jesus tells them, "You know, they're people, too." They deserve some measure of attention and are more in need of healing. He has a lot of negative things to say about Pharisees, of course, but in a sense those are really his people. Pharisees were trying to impart religious wisdom and encourage better practices. In Jesus' mind, though, they relied too heavily on outward appearances rather than inner transformation.

Imagine if everyone in a position to judge someone else withheld their judgment and simply embraced them. Imagine a God who is more concerned with the quality of your relationships than with the kind of company you keep. Jesus seems to be saying through his actions that doing our faith is more important than holding it. And then, after skipping those few verses, we come across a real-life example of doing faith.

First a man whose daughter has just died comes fully believing that Jesus can bring her back. But on his way to the man's house, a woman in the crowd who had been living with a terrible condition for twelve years got just close enough to him to touch his clothes. She didn't throw herself at his feet or beg him to help her. She just quietly, almost fearfully, made a little touch. She was doing faith in that moment, bit of a hail Mary, but still... And Jesus' reaction to her is really lovely. He doesn't correct her or try to bring her along or expect something from her, he just marvels at her faith. He marvels, I think, at her willingness to take that risk, to do faith in a way that most people around her would have thought ridiculous. But, you see, there's power in our willingness to risk; there's power in doing faith that we'll never experience if we stand back in judgment or if we bury ourselves in prayers and sacrifices rather than taking action. Oh, and, as an afterthought, he also brought a girl *who had died* back to life.

The power of doing faith rather than simply holding it and standing in judgment of others is written all over these stories. Our lives are meant for more than just holding the right beliefs. Our path to salvation is made through our willingness to practice in concrete ways God's steadfast love. Faith is something we do; it's something we're called on to demonstrate by reaching out to those around us who are in need of healing or protection or just a little love. When we withhold our care for, say, undocumented immigrants or transgender people or unhoused people or anyone whose life is considered less valued because of their background or religion or origin, when we withhold our care for them we're also saying our faith is irrelevant in the real world. So, when God says through Hosea, "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifices," or when Jesus eats with "tax collectors and sinners," we treat those words like we do fairy tales or clichés. They're nice little sayings but shouldn't be taken seriously. But there was nothing more serious for the future of Israel than God's demand for steadfast love and nothing more serious than Jesus' willingness to embrace the rejected of his world. How we do faith, how we act on our beliefs will shape our world and make the difference between a place of hostility and fear or one of healing and joy.

That may sound a little over the top to some of you. I understand; it seems like what we do in the small circle of influence we inhabit can't possibly make a difference in the world. Surely we don't have that kind of power. But joy and hope are just as contagious as fear and despair. Why else would the prophets keep insisting that God calls us to love and not hate, to peace and not war? Why would Jesus bother to eat with outcasts and tell us to love our enemies if it can't make any difference? If we didn't have the capacity to change the world and bring healing to so many who are damaged, then all these stories and teachings are pointless. I don't know about you, but I believe these stories matter. I believe they can shape us and inspire us to make a real difference in the world.

What Hosea tells his people and what Jesus teaches those around him, is God is counting on us to bring healing and compassion to others by doing faith in ways that reveal God's presence. Friends, let go of relying on empty rituals or of passing judgment and let the love of God flow through you to embrace a world longing to be whole and awakened to new life.

Amen