

A metaphor is a comparison between two seemingly unrelated things, one lesser known and one better known. The lesser known element of a metaphor is called the *tenor*; the better known element is called the *vehicle*. There *will* be a test on this material so listen up!

So if you tell someone “you are my sunshine,” there is little chance of confusion about how the solar system works. You’ve taken something everyone can understand—soaking in the rays, let’s say, on your favorite beach—and compared it to a relationship, something that is much harder to get a handle on.

Now let’s take it up a notch: *Jesus is the Good Shepherd*. While it may go very deep for us, it is still a metaphor. Unlike King David, Jesus almost certainly did not earn his salary by tending sheep. Whether he was (like his father) a carpenter, or whether he was (like so many of his disciples) a fisherman, or whether he ran a small grocery store—we can’t be sure. The New Testament is silent about this question. But when we say that Jesus is “the Good Shepherd” we aren’t making a claim about his day job. We are recalling a metaphor that runs throughout the Old Testament—and through the prophets. We are remembering King David and the messianic claims made about a Son of David who would come to gather up the lost sheep of Israel (another metaphor) and bring them home, and lead them beside still waters and through the valley of death and so on and so forth. Metaphors are powerful rhetorical devices because they can speak volumes in just a few words.

One of the hardest things to teach people about reading the Bible is to help them to grasp the power and depth of metaphorical language. Most of us have at least a little bit of Joe Friday in us—we want just the facts, ma’am. We live in a culture which tends to flatten language and so we can end up, even in mainline churches, with certain literalistic tendencies. It starts at a young age: like when you tell someone a wonderful story and they want to know “is it true?” What we are really asking is, “did it happen that way? Do you have the facts right?” But truth is about more than what a good journalist or historian can tell us; it’s about more than what happened but about what things mean. That is why the world needs poets. That is why the church needs poets.

I’ve been an EfM mentor for eight years—four in my previous parish and four here. For those who don’t know about Education for Ministry, it’s a lay theological education program that takes four years to complete. The first year you study the Old Testament, second year New Testament, third year Church History and fourth year Theology. But there is more to the program than that. Each week the readings in those four disciplines are discussed. But the heart of the program is something called “theological reflection”—and to do TR you have to understand metaphors.

Now I want to make a radical claim—or at least to some of you it will sound pretty radical, but hear me out. *All theological language is metaphorical*. That is why it is so important that we tend to these heady ideas. No one has seen God. We experience God’s presence, to be sure. We encounter God in scripture and in the sacraments. But as soon as we try to speak of these things we need metaphors—because when speaking about the divine we reach the limits of human language very quickly. In part this is what the first commandment is all about: always we are in

danger of taking our metaphors literally and thinking that the vehicle and the tenor are one in the same. But that is a form of idolatry.

So Jesus is and is not a “shepherd.” Or how about this: God is and is not, a “Father.” The metaphor means to convey something of the nature of God and our relationship with God, and I think it’s safe to say that is meant to be pretty positive stuff. Our heavenly father loves his children like a good dad does. But if your father beat you, or left home when you were six, or cheated on your mother—then the metaphor can be spiritually challenging at best and potentially even destructive. We have these big fights in the Church about inclusive language but many of those fights could be avoided, I think, (or at least mitigated by) a deeper awareness of how language in general works and specifically how metaphor works.

As a pastor, I am convinced that sometimes we need to let go of old metaphors in order to find God. We get stuck when we start to think the vehicle and the tenor are one and the same. But if the image of God the father is keeping you from the God who is beyond all of our knowing and all of our language, then it’s time to find some new metaphors—not to abandon God!

OK, I’m certain that some of you may have dozed off by now but let me call us all back together. Preachers are taught to be concrete and I’ve given you a lot of theoretical stuff for an August day, and worse than that a reminder that school is not very far off. But bear with me. As wonderful as metaphors are, they are always culture-bound. That’s why they are the last thing you learn when you try to communicate in a foreign language. Even across generational lines, as society changes, our metaphors change which is why it is sometimes so difficult for a sixteen year old to understand a seventy-six year old, and vice-versa.

So I want to try to connect all this theoretical stuff to an eighth-century prophet named Hosea. (That’s eight centuries BEFORE Christ, so we are talking about a guy who lived 2800 years ago!) Hosea lived in a time he perceived to be extremely unfaithful. He felt that people had forgotten the covenant with Yahweh. He felt that they were chasing after false gods, that they were not living the heart of the Torah by loving God and loving neighbor. As the American writer, Flannery O’Conner once put it, “to the hard of hearing you need to shout.” Well, Hosea lived in a time and place that was “hard of hearing” and he was a fire and brimstone prophet—a real shouter.

Two metaphors are central to his understanding of what has gone wrong with the covenant: the relationship between a husband and wife, and the relationship between a parent and child. Only here is the rub: marriage and family life 2800 years ago were very different than today. The role of women and of children in the society were very different. So Hosea’s use of these metaphors reflects the time and place he lived in, which creates challenges for us. One scholar I consulted this week (who happens to be female) put it this way: “this imaging reflects the historical situation of ancient Israel, where gender relationships were asymmetrical.” Now that’s a pretty dry way of saying it was a man’s world!

So last week we heard Hosea ranting and raving about “whoredom;” not a word we usually expect to hear when we come to church. The metaphor Hosea uses in the first chapter of his book is that God is like a husband who has been wronged by a cheating wife. (Since I was challenged to try to work in a Kenny Rogers song, as my colleague Ted Harris did in my absence, I’m tempted to sing “Ruby: Don’t Take Your Love to Town” here. But I’ll resist the temptation!)

In this metaphor—God is a wronged husband who is “out of his mind.” He vacillates between wanting to kill his wife and a desire for reconciliation. It’s hard when you hear just a snippet in church and some of you may not have been here last week but once you get that context—once you picture a person who is enraged that his spouse has cheated on him then you can make sense of the first chapter of Hosea. At one point Hosea speaks on God’s behalf: “I am NOT your God...you are NOT my people (you slut!)” And in the next instant: “we will get back together, I know we can work this out...I can’t live without you.”

This week, Hosea shifts his metaphor, and we are dealing with the parent of a kid who has gotten in with a bad crowd and finds herself in trouble. The parent can still remember as if it were yesterday what it was like to hold that baby safely in her arms. The parent can remember what it was like to control the environment with a playpen, and then those first steps, but still within a fenced in backyard. But while on the one hand that feels like yesterday, so much has changed. The kid has gone astray—run away from home, turned to drugs. You know the story. Whether you’ve been through it with your own kids or grandkids or been fortunate enough to escape it, you know the story—every parent’s worst nightmare.

And so here in the eleventh chapter of Hosea the point is also that God is “out of her mind.” She wants to kill Israel with her bare hands (and Dr. Phil has assured her that she needs to show tough love.) And yet—and yet: “how can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over? How can I treat you as if you were somebody else’s kid? I can’t destroy you; I love you.”

If we forget that this is metaphorical language we are in trouble. If we think that this metaphor is meant to define parenting, or marriage, for every time and place we are sorely mistaken. If we take the anthropological language too literally then it raises all kinds of questions about the nature of God that may well very unhelpful for our spiritual lives. But Hosea *isn’t* giving us a doctrine of marriage nor a manual for parenting for the twenty-first century.

To make sense of this text we need to recognize that Hosea is using metaphors that make sense to him, to say that God’s heart is broken. These metaphors are meant to unpack the notion that God is a mess over Israel’s disobedience. And yet...this God still loves Israel and cannot bear to bring the relationship to an end. In the midst of these intense metaphors, don’t lose that point—it’s the good news in this text. God works through God’s anger issues to say, even here in the Old Testament: “I am God, and no mortal; the holy one in your midst—and I will not come in wrath.”

God promises to return the ancient Israelites (and ultimately to return us) to our homes. That is where God settles: on homecoming, on reconciliation, on new life, on forgiveness, on what remains yet possible. God will not let human unfaithfulness define God’s own character of steadfast love and mercy. And that really is good news for us.

Now we may well need to find new ways to share that good news in the world. At the very least we owe it to Hosea and to ourselves to understand what he is about. In the end, though, it seems clear to me that he stands within the tradition that has been revealed to us in Jesus: the one who shows us how deep and how broad and how high God’s love really is, and the lengths to which God will go to restore the covenant, and claim us in love.