

The Gospel According to Jenny Curran

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



Hosea 11:1-9

Every evening in the McConnell household there is an exchange that takes place – or I should say several exchanges – between the humans and the canine. We have a West Highland White Terrier – 10 years old – whom we dearly love and with whom we have a very difficult time communicating. You would think after ten years of being together we would have this down, but it is not the case. And we won't even blame the dog for this, it's likely the humans. Nevertheless there are these exchanges that take place in our home where it is clear that our beloved Lexie is trying to say something to us. We will be sitting on the couch and she will come to us and stare. Just stare. Sometimes the staring is followed by a bark. Sometimes the stare and the bark means, "I want to play." Sometimes the stare and the bark means, "I want the food on your plate." Sometimes the stare and the bark means, "I want to go out." Sometimes the stare and the bark means, "I want you to let me up there so you can pet me." Sometimes the stare and the bark means, "There is a creature out there that must be chased and devoured." And it takes us dumb humans (for I am sure this is what she thinks of us) many, many minutes – if ever – to figure out what she is trying to say to us. Every night we go through this. Every night she looks at us with that look that says, "How many times do we have to do this before you understand me?" Every night we seek to span the canyon between human and canine, between master and creature, between man and man's best friend.

It's difficult to communicate across a canyon.

C.S. Lewis in a sermon he preached long

ago entitled *Transposition* wonders with us about this canyon that we can only imagine exists between the creator and the creature. What difficulty there might be in communication between God and his people. If God is really God and we are really us – then there is likely a lot to be lost in the translation. And Lewis wonders if it isn't a little bit like creatures in a one dimensional world trying to grasp a three dimensional world. Lewis uses this analogy. He says it would be like a boy born in a dungeon. And he has never seen the outside world. And his mother in the prison with him tries to describe to the son what the outside world looks like. She talks about trees and fields and rivers and mountains and cities and waves on the beach. But he can't quite grasp what these things look like. So she's able to get a hold of some pencil and paper and so she draws these things for her son. Clouds and waves and trees, and the boy thinks he understand that the world out there is a bunch of pencil lines. "No, no, no," says his mother, "the world isn't pencil lines. In fact there are no lines at all. The waves are waves, the trees are trees, the rivers are rivers." And now the world for the boy goes blank. He can't see beyond the lines. He can't see the three dimensional world beyond the one dimensional world of his mother's pencil drawings.

And Lewis wonders about this when it comes to the creature trying to grasp the creator – or for that matter the creator in his three dimensional world trying to communicate with his one dimensional creation. In this canyon between God and humans. There are just many things that get lost in translation.

I got thinking of this recently when I saw on the TV a preview for one of the new TV shows about another one of those superhuman heroes. This one is Supergirl. I know nothing about the 2015 version of Supergirl – but it got me to thinking of our fascination with Comic Book heroes. We are in this era where we are bringing all the comic book heroes to the big screen. We have Superman, Spider-man,

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Batman, the Wolverine (the greatest of all heroes, of course), the Hulk, the Wonder Woman, the Green Lantern and Captain America and so on. And it dawned on me that when it comes to imagining what could be the greatest and most powerful and most awesome supernatural force in the world – these are the characters we come up with – Batman, Spider-man, Superman, Supergirl. Superhumans that can fly, swing, punch, bust out in muscles, leap tall building in a single bound – this is the best we can come up, the most we can imagine in our one dimensional world when we try to think of the three dimensional power. The best we can come up with are heroes that jump high, fly fast, and punch hard.

It was the best the devil could come up with when he was tempting Jesus. Use your superhuman power to turn stones into bread and fly over the temple. And it goes to show this canyon between the human and the divine - how hard it is for us to grasp the three-dimensional God.

And that's why it might be so hard for us to comprehend this picture Hosea the prophet would want to paint for us about the three-dimensional God. Because quite to our surprise Hosea has something startling to suggest. Hosea is the prophet to Israel, and Israel, through poor political leadership has allied itself with unholy people and turned from

the ways of God and is on the way to ruin. And the people who see this can only imagine that God is really ticked and wants to destroy them. And the best that the people can come up with is that this powerful God must have either abandoned them or is preparing to destroy them. Because that's what superbeings do – they get angry and destroy. This is the God of the one dimensional world. And yet the message of the book of Hosea begins with a very different picture. Hosea imagines that the relationship God has with his people would be like if Hosea himself marrying a prostitute. Hard to imagine. But Hosea wonders if this isn't the relationship God has with his people – that God has committed himself to an unfaithful people – made vows to a prostitute – and yet God will remain faithful to his vows. God is not about to let go. That though Israel is faithless, though she cavorts with other nations and denies her allegiance to God, though she lives as though her creator doesn't even exist – God still will not let her go. God remains committed to her. And it all culminates in the wonderful poem of Hosea 11 –

*When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son.
The more I called them,
the more they went from me;
they kept sacrificing to the Baals,
and offering incense to idols.
Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk,
I took them up in my arms;
but they did not know that I healed them.
I led them with cords of human kindness,
with bands of love.*

*I was to them like those
who lift infants to their cheeks.
I bent down to them and fed them.*

.....
*I will not execute my fierce anger;
I will not again destroy Ephraim;
for I am God and no mortal,
the Holy One in your midst,
and I will not come in wrath.*

Now in this one dimensional world of ours that might be hard for us to comprehend. We might wonder if what we are hearing from Hosea about God is that God is a God who can be taken advantage of, if God is a God who seems to be willing to play the doormat, if God is the kind of God who in all appearances seems a bit weak and who cannot seem to let go of an unhealthy relationship. Maybe even an enabler. Unwilling to show tough love. We may wonder if Hosea's God is a fool. And at first blush this might make us recoil almost out of disbelief – how could the God of the universe be this way? How could the God of the universe marry himself to a prostitute? Why that isn't even PG in rating.

But then we remember that we are living in this pencil drawing world. And as best as Hosea might describe it for us – it would be hard for us to imagine God being anything more than what we might dream of in our comic book world.

It makes me think of Jenny Curran. Do you remember Jenny Curran? Jenny Curran was the girl loved by Forrest Gump. Do you remember Forrest Gump? Simple, simple Forrest Gump. The boy who couldn't walk right that everybody made fun of. But eventually he breaks from his leg braces and journeys to the corners of the world living this simple, simple life of loyalty to those who came his way. Lieutenant Dan. Bubba Blue. And the love of his life was Jenny Curran. She who had been abused and beaten and always was living her life on the run. She prostitutes

herself. She takes drugs. She contracts AIDS. But Forrest loves her. He never lets her go. He keeps showing up in her life. And he finally marries her and takes care of her until she succumbs to the illness of her wayward youth. And when you finish the story, you smile and you wonder, "Could anything like that ever happen in the world?"

Because you know there's probably a little Jenny Curran in all of us that would hope that it would. That somehow there would be some superhuman force in this world that instead of leaping tall buildings in single bound – would just love us enough never to let go. Love us enough to show up in the darkest places of our lives. Love us enough that though the conventional wisdom would be to show a little muscle, a little tough love, a little separation – that that there would be this Creator who would love his one dimensional creatures enough to somehow show us in poem and in person that though we prove the prostitute – he will never let us go.

And of course we do see this in person – when the three dimensional God takes on our one dimension and lives in our flat little world. Speaks our language. Humbles himself to be a servant. Subjects himself to our greatest cruelties. Lets us press him to the limit with our ridiculous faithlessness. And on the cross says, "Father forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing."

It makes me think of the older couple I once pastored. Their one and only child had lost his way when he was young. He joined up with the wrong crowd and got involved with drugs and the adjoining crime that helped support his drug habit. And then quite tragically this boy whom they raised in the church and brought to Sunday School, their one and only was arrested and convicted for a violent crime that put him behind bars for the rest of his life. What do you do when that's your son? How do you be mother and father to such a child? Well, of course, you empty your bank account to buy the

best defense lawyer for your boy. You sit stoically in the courtroom a row behind your boy. You weep when they take your boy away. You pray every day for your boy. You do whatever you can to appeal your boy's conviction and sentence. You visit every week your boy in prison. You ask your pastor to visit your boy. Why? Well, because he's your boy. It's the only language a parent knows.

It was fifty years ago that Shel Silverstein published his little story entitled *The Giving Tree* about the tree that loves the little boy so much that he doesn't think twice about giving away first his apples for the boy to make some money, and then his branches for the boy to make a house, and then his trunk for the boy to build a boat and then finally as a stump for the boy, now an old man, to use as a place to sit. And with every act of giving the tree is very happy. And it's just one of those stories that we love and that we don't understand because in this one dimensional world it's hard to find such a tree.

Except, of course, the tree on the hill called Calvary. The tree that bears the Lamb of God. Atop that hill upon which the faithless stand and jeer and laugh at the One who plays the fool. The fool for love. They can't quit get the three dimensions. They can't quite grasp the language being spoken. But somewhere in the back of the crowd there's Jenny Curran. Somewhere in the back of that crowd there's that mom and that dad back from visiting their imprisoned son. Somewhere in the back of that crowd there's that prophet Hosea and his prostitute wife. Somewhere in the back of that crowd are you and me. Staring. Staring. And wondering, and maybe even understanding the language. The divine language.



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