THE GOD-IMAGE OF
THE FAITHFUL SPOUSE
A Reversal in the Filipino Context*

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Fr. David describes Hosea’s use of marriage as a metaphor, to portray God’s covenant with his people, as a radical paradigm shift. This shift, from the political model of the king-vassal relationship marked by conditional benevolence towards the familial intimate relationship of conjugal love marked by unconditional fidelity, reflects a new theology which would significantly influence prophetic preaching and Israel’s way of understanding Yahweh. By imaging God as a faithful, jealously-angry-turned-merciful husband, Hosea shows God as a vulnerable, life-giving lover. By portraying Israel as Gomer, the beloved but unfaithful wife, Hosea not only calls on Israel to see its idolatry as it would a wife’s adultery, a shameless disloyalty deserving death. Hosea also interprets Israel’s sufferings to be a righteous consequence of her infidelity. In the disarming metaphor of Hosea/God changing heart—steadfast love and mercy overcoming righteous indignation—lies the hope of Israel’s salvation in God, her faithful spouse.

The husband-wife metaphor, says Fr. David, also set a new paradigm for the culture-bound relationship of marriage in ancient Israel.

*Reaction to Fr. Pablo David’s lecture on “Hosea 3:1-3 (The Prophet and God’s Faithfulness to His People).”
Hosea's story—a betrayed husband overcoming possessiveness to seek out his faithless wife and accord his beloved her dignity and freedom—points to marriage as a relationship not of power and ownership, but of mutual love between two persons, equal in dignity, status and freedom. A wife is not to be treated as a possession or slave of the husband. This was a revolutionary notion in Hosea's time, where the wife was considered a husband's property, and mentioned—as in the Exodus Commandments—in the same breath with household goods, oxen and slaves.

As a Filipino, married woman and one involved in a ministry for healing troubled marriages, I feel drawn to respond to the powerful images in Fr. David's exposition, as these relate to marriage in the contemporary Philippine context. My reflection centers on Hosea's choice of metaphors, namely the God-image in the faithful spouse, and marriage as a covenant.

Hosea's notion of God as the faithful spouse invites us, first, to recognize our own individual and communal relationship with God as a marriage, a union initiated by one so in love with us that nothing can separate us from this love. Hosea's marital story also reinforces mutual dignity and fidelity as the hallmark of marital love.

Hosea's God-image of the forgiving, faithful spouse especially challenges the cultural double standard in gender-relations, where a faithful wife is expected to take back an unfaithful husband, while a faithful husband is usually not expected to do the same for an unfaithful wife.

However, Hosea's choice of metaphor—the husband as the faithful spouse—is quite unsettling and difficult to relate to. This is mainly because in the Philippine context, it is much more common to find that the faithful spouse is the wife, not the husband. In our culture, where wives (more than husbands) are expected to be faithful, it is usually the wife who, like Hosea, suffers the anguish from betrayal, but ultimately acts to save the marriage. It is she who seeks, awaits, forgives her unfaithful spouse. There are no published statistics yet on the role of women in saving marriages, but offhand, perhaps we
need only look at our own grandmothers, mothers, or aunts, whose self-sacrificing love has saved marriages and families from totally falling apart. It is thus the Filipino wife who, in her loyalty and mercy, more closely mirrors the God-image of the faithful spouse.

Hosea’s choice of a masculine God-image for the faithful spouse is unsettling for still another reason. The extremely violent reaction of the betrayed spouse in Hosea 2 is difficult to reconcile with an image of a loving God and, more importantly, with the behavior of a betrayed wife. Publications on marital infidelity have shown there are gender differences in responding to a spouse’s infidelity—one common observation being that, generally, men deal with their hurt and anger by striking out violently at their wife or others, while women deal with their hurt and anger by striking themselves and turning despondent.²

Hosea’s violent punitive behavior may not be typically far from that of a betrayed Filipino husband. A betrayed Filipino wife on the other hand may, and often does, rant and rage at her husband’s infidelity, but her righteous anger rarely goes to the extent of the violent, physical abuse and public shaming that marked Hosea’s reaction. This difference in response may largely be a result of the cultural conditioning to tolerate male infidelity, as well as gender differences in physical strength and role expectations. If the betrayed wife is dependent on the husband for economic support, her punitive acts may, at most, be limited to verbal violence. But, as has been noted, the tendency of many a betrayed Filipino wife is to sink into depression or even to think she is to blame for her husband’s wrongdoing! In the short or medium run, however, the betrayed wife tends to bounce back and harness her psycho-spiritual energies to seek reconciliation and give her spouse and marriage yet another chance.

Commenting on the violent reaction of the betrayed husband in Hosea, biblical scholar Gale Yee warns that this metaphor may unfortunately be used to reinforce or justify wife battering and abuse. The reader is thus urged to be critical in accepting the images in the story. Indeed, the gender difference in responding to infidelity invites one to wonder: if Gomer, not Hosea, had been the faithful one,
what would the God-image of this feminine faithful spouse be like? We might have a different picture of Hosea 2!

It is thus noteworthy that Fr. David focuses his exposition on Hosea 3:1-3 and emphasizes Hosea’s decision to become vulnerable and compassionate as a response to a direct command from God. Hosea’s move to forgive, redeem and wait for his beloved may resonate more with the Filipino wife. It is in this move, characteristic of the feminine response, where the God-image of the faithful spouse assumes a decidedly feminine face. And yet, such undeserved unconditional loving is precisely what makes God’s way of loving radically different from conditional human love. It is thus awesome when one realizes how generations of Filipino wives have almost instinctively incarnated this God-image of the faithful spouse, enfleshing in their sensitivity, this divine way of loving unconditionally.

And so, it is alarming to sense a secular culture creeping in today which, instead of recognizing the image and likeness of God in the love and fidelity of faithful wives, tends to degrade and scorn the choice for unilateral steadfast faithfulness and unconditional love. Today, even within Catholic families and circles, faithful wives who struggle and stay in a marriage marked by one-sided faithfulness are called, disparagingly, martyr. This once noble Christian mark of being a “martyr” has fallen into such disgrace that it takes courage nowadays to stay and save a failed marriage. It takes courage for a Christian spouse to make up—with one’s own fidelity—for a spouse’s failure to be faithful. The empowerment of women is undoubtedly a wonderful sign of the Spirit moving to affirm each person’s God-given dignity, but such empowerment needs to celebrate, as well, a woman’s choice to grace her troubled marriage with a love that is merciful, vulnerable—and yes, powerless—the way God loves!

Indeed, the marital landscape today, shaped by social and cultural changes over the past decades, poses new challenges for pastoral discernment and action in the new millennium. Countless women and men, facing exigencies of unemployment, poverty and the struggle for economic security, have been and continue to be lured out of their homes to work overseas, creating, in the process, strains on
marital ties of fidelity. Women's self-image and opportunities for personal growth, affinities and economic independence are expanding beyond traditionally marital roles and parameters. Filipino wives today are no longer as willing—as our grandmothers and mothers were—to assume sole responsibility in the sacrifices and costs of being faithful, or of saving a marriage when disillusionment, particularly infidelity, strikes.

This phenomenon is not necessarily a bad thing, for God’s invitation and grace to be faithful or save a failing marriage is not at all limited to women only! Thanks to the marriage movement which aims to enrich, renew and heal marriages, there is a growing awareness of the shared responsibility of both husband and wife for making a marriage work. The consciousness of Filipino couples is being formed on the importance of mutuality in love and faithfulness. In our (mine and my husband’s) own experience of peer ministering to troubled marriages, the cooperation of both spouses is crucial to rebuild the relationship. Not all of these failing marriages were about infidelity; but whatever the source of disillusionment and misery was, the shared decision to save the marriage—with hard work and God’s grace—bore fruit, in time, in renewed love. This is not to say that all marriages can be saved. It is only to say that out of ten such distressed marriages already written off as “hopeless” and “irreconcilable,” eight of these have been able to awaken hope and reconciliation. What is significant about these renewed marriages is that it initially took only one spouse—either the husband or wife—persevering in faith, to start the renewal process; along the way, both may collaborate, and then at different moments, it is only either the husband or the wife alone who is cooperating with God’s grace and singly carrying the “cross,” but eventually, the couple does experience the power and joy of the resurrection in their marriage!

Today, the concept of Christian marriage as a lifetime commitment is being eroded by the secular concept of marriage as a “civil contract.” Once one party fails to fulfill an obligation, that’s it, the contract no longer holds. Hosea comes again to say that marriage is about justice, equality, mutual love—yes—but it’s also more than
that! In our imperfect world of imperfect human beings, the marital relationship of love is often lived out in conditions that are not always fair. All is NOT fair in love. The capacity to love is not “equal.” True love requires taking the risk to be vulnerable and powerless. When illusions are shattered, or unfaithfulness strikes, and it is difficult, even foolish, to stay loving and faithful, that is when real faithfulness begins, when marriage can become an experience of unconditional love and benevolence.

Hosea’s metaphor of covenant marriage and the faithful spouse is prophetic and revolutionary as ever, for many marriages today, like Hosea’s, are no “sugar and spice and all things nice” fairy tales. Many a faithful spouse struggles with the pain and injustice of betrayal. The temptation is strong to get stuck in anger and vindictiveness. But when a faithful spouse, whether man or woman, decides to go beyond his or her pain, and love steadfastly, forgive compassionately and wait patiently for the other to return, there shines the very image, likeness and presence of God.

This is why we dare believe that marriage is a sacrament. Marriage is a visible sign of God’s presence not only when both spouses are faithful, but also—and perhaps more so—even when only one spouse is unconditionally faithful and steadfast in loving. God’s power and grace is present in the love of that faithful spouse. The marriage vow “to love for better or for worse” is really an “oath,” a promise and commitment to fulfill regardless of the behavior of one’s spouse. It is not surprising to learn that “oath” is the real meaning of the root word of “sacrament.” Indeed, as Hosea shows, it is the faithful spouse, steadfast in love and mercy who, like God, keeps the covenant alive.

Whether, and when, that faithful love will ever be reciprocated depends on the unfaithful spouse. The faithful spouse always respects the freedom of the beloved. Did Gomer ever learn to love Hosea as he desired her to? Did Israel return to God, as he so passionately longed for? Does it matter, does it make a difference to the faithful one, to the depth of his love? What does this say about the way God loves us? Can the human heart reflect this unconditional, divine love? How can the human heart reject such a love?
The answers to these questions tell us why the theology of the prophet Hosea remains radical, powerfully-moving, and life-changing, even today.

Notes

1That women in other cultures will also have difficulties sympathizing with Hosea’s predicament is noted by biblical scholar Gale Yee: “Male infidelity is the dominant phenomenon.... Given the sizeable occurrence of unfaithful husbands, women face greater challenges in appropriating theological truths when God is depicted as a husband. The gender specific imagery of Hosea 3 throws up obstacles for women in listening to God’s Word.” See commentary and reflections in Gale Yee, “Hosea,” New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in 12 Volumes, Vol. VIII, ed. Leander A. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996) 232.

2On gender differences in responding to a spouse’s affair, consider the following: “In general, women are likely to rehabilitate the (marriage) relationship and keep it alive; men are more likely to end it and find a replacement, if only in their fantasies. Women are more apt to attribute the affair to their general unworthiness; men, to their sexual inadequacy. Women may exaggerate the significance of the affair and take longer to heal; men may compartmentalize their pain and move on.” Janis Abrahams Spring with Michael Spring, After the Affair: Healing the Pain and Rebuilding Trust When a Partner has been Unfaithful (New York: Harper Perennial, 1996) 31. “Many women believe that anger is a destructive force and fear its potential consequences, which may include disapproval, rejection and violence... and thus attempt to preserve their marriage at their own expense.... Men, in their struggle to handle their rage... direct their blame toward their rival. Many men respond violently. Sexual jealousy is frequently cited as a motive in wife battering.” Rona Subotnik and Gloria G. Harris, Surviving Infidelity: Making Decisions, Recovering from the Pain, 2nd Edition (Avon MA: Adams Media Corporation, 1994) 98-99. “Husbands do not act the hurt, rejected victim as easily as wives do. Instead, they smoulder with anger, put fist in walls, threaten to kill people. This is even true for gentle, forbearing men.... Women, while also being furious (‘hell hath no fury like a woman scorned’) are more generally despondent and hurt rather than angry. Of course, wives who discover their husbands’ affairs are usually also angry.
But if they show too much anger, the tide of support may turn away from them and roll towards their husbands.” Janet Reibstein and Martin Richards, *Sexual Arrangements: Marriage, Monogamy and Affairs* (London: Mandarin, 1992) 192-93.

3 Yee, 213-97.