

I grew up in Kansas City when the Royals were actually a good baseball team. [baseball card of George Brett] My favorite player was #5, George Brett - I always wanted #5 on my little league teams and I always cheered extra loud for him. I'm sure most of us in here had a childhood hero, so you know how much I idolized George Brett. How I looked up to him and wanted to be just like him when I grew up.

I was a teenager before I learned that George Brett isn't actually a very nice guy. I was only 3 when Brett hit the infamous Pine Tar Home Run. In other words, I was too young to see how completely he lost his head when things didn't go his way. And though I did witness a tantrum or two, it wasn't until I was old enough for my friends and I began to encounter George Brett out and about in Kansas City that I realized he wasn't a very nice guy.

I don't mean that he's a terrible person - I just mean George Brett is a guy who played baseball because he was good at it, not because he wanted to talk to people all the time. He comes across to fans as gruff, rude and arrogant, which was pretty devastating to learn about my childhood hero. That was the first time someone I'd placed on a pedestal fell down among us mere humans.

What about you?

My wife Amanda is from St. Louis, and I'm sure many of you remember when Albert Pujols [add baseball card to George Brett] left the Cardinals in 2011 to go play for the Angels. The city of St. Louis was devastated... they had been convinced Pujols was loyal to the city of St. Louis and the Cardinals team. But with a \$250 million, 10-year contract, he left for Los Angeles.

Now, I'm not sure there are many of us who would refuse to move to Los Angeles for \$250 million, but the city of St. Louis was outraged. They felt betrayed, abandoned by someone they'd all been convinced was loyal to the end. Loyal no matter what.

Of course, there are examples closer to home, too, but it's not basketball season, and it's still too soon. Right, Clevelanders? [add LeBron Cavaliers card]

What is it about betrayal that stings so badly? At the heart, betrayal is a relational crime - the betrayed feels personally slighted. In the sports world, this relationship is almost entirely one-sided: George Brett still doesn't know who I am, and Albert Pujols couldn't possibly know the millions who felt betrayed by his departure.

But when it comes to personal relationships, betrayals are the worst kind of pain. Not only does the loss of the relationship hurt, it's wrapped in the shame of trusting the wrong person and the ache of having been found in some way inferior or unworthy by the betrayer. The pain of betrayal is one of the deepest wounds we bear, one of the greatest human sins - it's no wonder that when Dante reaches the lowest circle of Hell in *The Inferno*, he finds two great betrayers there along with Satan - Marcus Junius Brutus who killed Caesar and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus himself.

If we were to go around the room, we could all share a story of a time we've been betrayed. Of the pain we felt (and still feel).

But we are reticent to share about the times we've been the betrayer. We won't paint ourselves with the same brush. You don't understand!, we rush to explain. There were extenuating circumstances. If you see it from my perspective, you'll see it's not as bad as it looks!

We're so quick to judge our betrayers, but when the harsh light of truth shines on our own betrayals, we hide behind excuses and justifications. We refuse to extend the same grace to our betrayers that we lavish so effortlessly on ourselves.

The truth hurts. We don't want to acknowledge the same ugliness we find in others is in ourselves too. And yet we can't escape from it. That's not to say that all betrayals are equal, of course. Clearly sometimes the consequences of someone else's betrayal are much worse than what I've done.

But the same impulse - to prioritize myself, to put my needs or my image or my life before that of my friend, that impulse that's at the heart of betrayal is common to all of us. We're all George Brett and Albert Pujols. We're all Judas and Brutus, no matter how big or small.

And until we face the harsh light of that truth, we can't move forward. We can't become better. We can't find the healing God offers both the betrayed and the betrayer.

This summer, we're working through a series of books often called the Minor Prophets. The Prophets are people who received messages from God to deliver to his people. Their writings were collected and included in the Bible. Some of these prophets wrote a lot - guys like Isaiah and Jeremiah. Others wrote much less, so the books that bear their names are much shorter. We call them "minor" prophets because of how short their books are, but we end up ignoring them too. The Minor Prophets are some of the least-familiar books in the whole Bible, even to those who've been reading the Scriptures for a long time.

The Minor Prophets wrote over a several-hundred year period of Israel's history that was stormy, to say the least. It was filled with political intrigue and religious wars. It was a time of uncertainty and fear for many people. God's people were anxiously awaiting the Day God would show up and rescue them. The Prophets' messages are varied, but they all aim to help God's people survive the storms of their present circumstances and the storm of God's coming. While their books are short, their messages are powerful and vital to our faith. They're Minor Prophets with major implications for our life with God.

[Scripture Slide] Today we meet the prophet Hosea - go ahead and turn with me to chapter 6 of his book. If you grabbed one of the maroon Bibles off the rack on the way in or out of the pews in front of you, you can find Hosea 6 on page XXX. And please, if you don't own a bible, keep that one as a gift from us.

As you're turning to Hosea 6, a little about Hosea: he lived about 150 years after the Israelite Civil War, in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. He prophesied in the decades leading up to the Assyrian invasion of 722 BC that resulted in the total destruction of Israel.

That period of Israel's history was characterized by religious and political confusion. The kings who ruled Israel during Hosea's lifetime welcomed and encouraged the worship of foreign gods as a way to achieve political stability and protection from the looming threat of the Assyrian Empire.

God is heartbroken at Israel's betrayal. Rather than trusting in Yahweh for their safety and security, for protection and provision, they are looking to treaties with other nations, treaties ratified by worship of their pagan gods. Through Hosea, God sends a message of warning and judgment. God warns Israel that their current woes are the result of their continued unfaithfulness. In this passage, Hosea pleads with

Israel to return to God, to reaffirm their covenant as God's people. Let's read together, beginning in verse 1:

Come, let us return to the Lord. He has torn us to pieces; now he will heal us. He has injured us; now he will bandage our wounds. In just a short time he will restore us, so that we may live in his presence. Oh, that we might know the Lord! Let us press on to know him. He will respond to us as surely as the arrival of dawn
or the coming of rains in early spring.

"O Israel and Judah, what should I do with you?" asks the Lord. "For your love vanishes like the morning mist
and disappears like dew in the sunlight. I sent my prophets to cut you to pieces -- to slaughter you with my words, with judgments as inescapable as light.

I want you to show love, not offer sacrifices. I want you to know me more than I want burnt offerings. --
Hosea 6:1-6

[Dew on grass with sun] According to Hosea, Israel has been experiencing some sort of suffering - we think it was a skirmish with some neighboring tribes or a minor earthquake, but God is ready to heal them. Hosea promises that if Israel will seek God, God is anxious to respond to them. God's response is - in Hosea's words - as reliable as dawn.

God's people, on the other hand are anything *but* reliable. Hosea says their "love" is gone as quickly as dew. The Hebrew word there that's translated as "love" is the word *chesed*. It's a word we don't really have in English (if you compare several English translations of this verse, you'll find it rendered several ways).

Chesed refers to a kind of loyalty, a particular brand of faithfulness. *Chesed* specifically describes a person who honors a covenant, an agreement between two parties. Covenants are a kind of public faithfulness. So *chesed* is found in allies who aid each other in a battle. In friends who've sealed a mutually-beneficial business agreement. In spouses who honor their marriage vows. *Chesed* describes the kind of love and faithfulness found specifically inside a covenant. It's covenant loyalty. [It would be fascinating to do a sort of "Famous Duos" collage – Batman and Robin, Marshall and Lily, Goose and Mavrick, etc]

So it's surprising that God describes his people's *chesed* as so fleeting. *Chesed* that's so temporary isn't really loyalty at all. And in light of this commitment taken so lightly, God warns that prophets have been sent to cut them to pieces, that his very arrival will bring inescapable judgment.

Wow. This is exactly why people stay out of the Old Testament in general and the Minor Prophets in specific. This is the angry, wrathful, judgmental God Christians today are embarrassed to find in the pages of the Old Testament.

But look again at what Hosea says:

"Your love (*chesed*) vanishes like the morning mist and disappears like dew in the sunlight. I sent my prophets to cut you to pieces -- to slaughter you with my words, with judgments as inescapable as light."

How is God slaughtering them? With his words. With judgments that are inescapable as light. God's judgment is always presented as powerful, and as terrible for those who are found wanting. But strangely, it's often presented as this: God's words being sharp. God's presence being overwhelming in the sense that a blinding light overwhelms our optic nerves. When God shows up, judgment happens. The good are separated from the bad. They're divided by God's very presence, by the powerful, creative word that spoke the world into being.

[dawn/dew picture again] The Dawn metaphor makes more sense: God's coming is like the sun rising. When the sun rises, we can see clearly the nature of reality. So too, when God comes, we will be able to discern what is true and false because Truth himself will be standing among us.

When God appears among them, the very embodiment of faithfulness will shine inescapable light on everyone, and those who are unfaithful will be revealed. Like light, God's presence allows us to see truth and falsehood. True *chesed* and false idols.

But that light shines on us, too. God's presence is the judgment. God comes among us like a mirror, revealing to us our true selves. We can't escape the reality of who we are. We can't make excuses or justifications. We can't hide and obfuscate. In the presence of pure, holy goodness and faithfulness, all the ways we are unfaithful are revealed.

Now if you're like me, this is where you say, But I'm here! I'm a good person! I come to Church. I pray. I read my bible (sometimes). I thought those were the things I'm supposed to do to be on the right side of God's judgment!

In fact, I thought that the fact that I'm here and not somewhere else right now was what made me one of God's people!

Israel could've said much the same - they prayed, they listened to the Scriptures read during worship. They memorized God's words. They offered sacrifices, as God commanded them.

We can imagine the Israelites listening to Hosea and having much the same objections *then* we do now. But look again at what God tells them:

I want you to show love (*chesed*), not offer sacrifices. I want you to know me more than I want burnt offerings.

This is the central message of several of the prophets: religion isn't about rituals. As our speaker Dr. Spaulding said last week: reducing religion to what you do or don't do is wrong. It's about being transformed.

All those rituals - in Israel's day, it was Temple and sacrifice and prayer; in our day it's reading Scripture and worshipping together and prayer and more - they're meant to transform us. They're meant to help us know God.

God says, Do you think I want you to offer sacrifices because I like dead animals? No! The sacrifices are meant to form you into a faithful people, into persons who are *chesed*. Loyal. Loving. Do you think I just like fire and *that's* why I had you give all these burnt offerings? Don't be foolish! The point of the offerings has always been so you *know me better*.

God could say much the same to us today. How often do we participate in religious activities out of obligation? As though we're fulfilling our half of a contract, holding up our end of a bargain? We dutifully check off attending a worship gathering or going to a small group or trying our hand at prayer or giving to a cause or reading the Bible.

We reduce the activities to the activities themselves, as though there's something inherently valuable about saying some words out loud or reading a page or two. We give as though God needs our money.

But all along, all these activities and practices are meant to point beyond themselves. They're meant to help us know the God who is beyond us. The infinite, uncreated creator. These spiritual practices like worship and reading scripture and prayer and giving and all the others are vehicles to connect us to God. They help us to know God better, and to become like God. They form us into a faithful people. A people who embodies *chesed* to God and to others.

We want to be a faithful people. A loving and joyful and peaceful. We want to be patient and kind and generous and gentle and self-controlled. Because the truth is God will come among us - as faithful as the dawn. And when God arrives, when the light of his presences shines on us, will we welcome the light or scurry back into the dark?

It depends on who we've become: are we a people who look like God or a people who look like something else? Are we loyal? Are we faithful? Are we *chesed*? The point isn't to find a magical practice that if we do it God will say we're good enough to get in - that's the thinking that turns religion into a dirty word. If we're only in it for the benefits, then our loyalty is as fleeting as LeBron or Pujols or any of the other guys.

And I can't emphasize enough that I don't blame those guys for going - but that's in baseball or basketball. And it was for millions upon millions of dollars.

But when it comes to our souls? Our loyalty, our *chesed* is invaluable. We want to be a people who are loyal to the end. Who are wholly transformed out of lives of selfishness and death into lives of life, of faithfulness. Lives that look like God. We want the relationship behind the ritual.

It comes from seeking God, from allowing the rituals to lead us to God. If we just check a box and go about our business, we'll end up as insubstantial as dew. As unreliable as a contract. But if we allow ourselves to be formed, if we seek God in all we do, if we wait for God to meet us and to shape us, we become faithful as God is faithful. We become loving as God is loving. We become agents of peace as God is working for peace.

Communion Set Up

[Communion Slide] Is there a ritual that reminds us more wholly of who God is than the Communion Table? This ritual - coming to this table, receiving these elements, reminds us that God's *chesed* was expressed by giving his very life for us. God held nothing back from us, so we are invited to come to his table, to hold nothing back from him.

It's Jesus' death and resurrection that transform us, that enables us to walk in the path of life. The night before he gave himself up to death, Jesus broke bread and gave it to his disciples. He said it was his

body, broken for our broken covenant. We take wafers to represent our own unfaithfulness, our own propensity to choose paths other than God's.

Jesus also gave a cup of wine to his disciples to represent his blood poured out to make a new covenant between them and God. We dip our wafers in grape juice to show that Jesus' death reconnects us to God. Jesus opens the way back to life for us.

You don't have to be a member of Beavercreek Nazarene to receive communion. If you're willing to admit your own unfaithfulness - that your *chesed* is as lasting as morning dew, if you're willing to face the harsh light of God's judgment and be made new by Jesus' death and resurrection, then you're invited to come forward and share his meal.

Baseball Card Benediction

As you leave today, make sure you grab a baseball card. These are for the most part players barely remembered by history. They're men who've faded into the recesses of our cultural memory much as we all will. This week, may your card remind you that even the most famous among us will fade away like morning dew. May that player remind you that your life is found not in ritual, but in the person behind the ritual. May they remind you to seek God this week as you go about the routines of your life.

Now go...