

## FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS

### Hosea 11

*“How can I give you up, O Ephraim?”*

I know that to most of you I am the very picture of a man, ruggedly handsome with a steadfast carriage and resolute demeanor, but I have to confess, some things do scare me. One of them is the thought of teaching my children to ride a bike. Right now, they have training wheels, and I am very comfortable with that, but I am dreading the day those wheels come off, when I give them a push and let them learn to ride on their own. I just can't stand the thought of them getting hurt. My heart sinks just imagining it. And I don't think I'm the first father to feel that way. I think it sort of runs in daddy DNA.

Our heavenly Father speaks to Israel in some of the most tender language in all of Holy Scripture today. Strong as He is, steadfast and resolute, He shrinks at the thought of them getting hurt. He remembers the days when He fed them, when He taught them to walk, when He carried them in His arms. He feared the day they grew up and spread their wings, and He did so for good reason: Israel had no sooner learned to walk than it walked away from its Father. The LORD warned them. He called them back, but the more He called, the more they went away. God's heart was broken. He had lost His child, and not only His child, but part of Himself.

How many of you haven't felt the LORD's pain? Every parent has at one point or another. From little on, our children grow, and as they grow we lament the moments that have passed, we miss the days when they were still dependent upon us, when they loved nothing more than being in our arms, than sharing with us every tidbit of the joys of their life in a flurry of words and gestures. And as they grow, we can't help but fear what the future holds. What will they be? What decisions will they make?

Parents, do you remember the day your child was born? Your life flashes through your mind, the things you regret, the decisions you wish you could take back, the words you wish you had said or swallowed. You remember how things were for you growing up, and you wish better for your little one. You resolve to take the best from your own parents, to forgive them their worst and try not to repeat it.

Perhaps the most painful part of parenting is when your child does grow up and indeed fall into some of the same pitfalls that ensnared you, or, even worse, even greater traps. How many parents have confessed their sorrow to me when their children have erred, have strayed from the faith, have fallen into unrepentant sin, have rejected the Faith, asking me what they did wrong, what they should have done differently, why their child would rebel against their upbringing! There have been a lot and there will be more, and one day I will probably be asking the same things of my confessor. All of us who raise children will see them fall to one degree or another, and when that happens, we will get a tiny little sample of what the heavenly Father feels in our text.

I'll never forget what was one of the lowest point in my life. I know it's hard to believe, but I've sinned once or twice—okay, maybe three times. For a while, the whole disappointing

my parents thing became a kind of art form. One time, after a particularly stupid string of decisions—you ever notice how it works that way: one bad choice ushers in another—I was sitting at the table with my parents, waiting to be read the riot act. But they didn't say anything. We just sat there. We sat there for what seemed like forever. Finally, I said something—I forget what, but probably something along the lines of, “How long am I grounded?”—and they told me I wasn't going to be punished, because this all must have been their fault, they must have done something wrong. I don't think I've ever felt so sorry in all my life. I knew enough from seeing the home situations of my friends to realize that I had been blessed with exceptional parents. My parents hadn't done anything wrong; I had done something wrong.

My heart sinks at funerals for parents whose children were estranged from them. To see the child cry, to hear the child express his or her regrets is an agonizing experience. The “ifs” are like daggers. “If only I hadn't said this. If only I had done that. If only I had gotten over myself. If only I had made the time.” There are few things more painful than looking back and realizing you have hurt those who love you most—your parents, your spouse, your children, your friends. Some of you have had that experience. Some of you will have that experience. How painful, then, should it be to realize that we have hurt the one who has loved us most, that we have let our heavenly Father down, and not only let Him down, but abandoned Him?

The time had come for Israel's punishment. There would be consequences for Israel's sin. Assyria would devastate them in a flood of inconceivable violence. And here is where the text is appointed to end, but I just couldn't do that to you or to the text, because what the LORD says next is nothing short of amazing:

*How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my burning anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.*

You deserve it, but the LORD can't bring Himself to do it: He cannot, He will not give up on His child. There are consequences for our sin, but He remains the Father and you the prodigal son. He not only longs to receive you back, but He runs to you with open arms. He wants to teach you to walk again—to walk aright according to His will, to take you in His arms again—to lift you out of your sins, to feed you again—to nourish your lagging spirit with the Bread of Life. “*How can I give you up, O Ephraim?*” And you are Ephraim.

My children may fall when they learn to ride their bikes, but I will, Lord willing, pick them up. My children may make some stupid decisions, even a string of them, but I will, Lord willing, forgive them. My children may cause me greater pain than I have ever known, but I will, Lord willing, console them. Why? Because that is what a father does. And that is what our Father does. “*How can I give you up, O Ephraim?*”

It's not our Father's fault. He hasn't done anything wrong; we have. Confess that. Feel the pain you have caused Him. Let that pain drive you back into His arms for mercy. And then let Him take that pain away, through the Christ's pain in His suffering and death.

*“How can I give you up, O Ephraim?”* The Father will not give up His child. That’s precisely what Christmas is about. And just as He received Jesus back in the resurrection, He receives you back through the cross, for your sin has been punished, your redemption won.

*“How can I give you up, O Ephraim?”* Enough regrets. This is a time for thanks and praise, for today your Father calls you. This time, don’t run farther away in shame. Jump into His arms in forgiven joy, and let Him teach you to walk again, to walk in Christ, your incarnate Brother, your crucified Savior, your risen Lord. Amen.