

Nobody likes to see a marriage on the rocks, but sometimes the marriage isn't what the couple thought it would be. They have to decide: Do we split or do we work this through? The divorce rate in the United States has increased in recent decades, as more and more people decided to end a relationship rather than work on it again.

There are advantages to working things out. When a couple examines what is going wrong and tries to fix it, they learn more about themselves, more about each other, and more about working with the limitations and blessings that every relationship holds.

Hosea the prophet found himself in a bad marriage. The Old Testament contains books by four major prophets and twelve minor ones. Hosea is the first of the minor prophets. Through him, God told Israel to go back to the covenant. The people were being unfaithful in their worship and in their care for the needy. When the Assyrian army attacked Israel, the people believed God was punishing them, and they began to change their ways.

God compared Israel's infidelity to the breakup of Hosea's marriage. Hosea was married to a woman named Gomer. There aren't many women named Gomer any more. There aren't many men named Gomer either, but that was not the real problem with the marriage. Hosea said Gomer was unfaithful. Hosea had every reason to break off the relationship. God said Israel was unfaithful. God had every reason to break off the covenant. But God gave Israel a chance, and Hosea gave Gomer a chance.

Today's first reading is God speaking to Israel, but it could just as easily have been Hosea speaking to Gomer. God woos Israel like a young lover. "I will lead her into the desert and speak to her heart." God believes Israel will come back. "She shall respond there as in the days of her youth." Young love responds to wooing.

But when love is older, it is different. Both partners know each other better. Their love grows not from what is sexy, but from what is right, from justice, mercy and faithfulness.

Love does not always end the way it begins. Sometimes it ends poorly, but other times it ends stronger. Love thrives when it is rooted in right and justice, mercy and faithfulness. When we break our covenant, God is always willing to take us back. We get some sense of God's willingness every time we patiently work out our disagreements with someone we loved differently when love was young.