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“Spiritual Literacy: Beauty”

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Hosea 1:2-10

As a young girl growing up, I always wanted to be beautiful. Deep down I knew that it was never going to happen, because my definition of female beauty was everything I was not—petite, blonde, blue-eyed, buxom and bubbly. Of course, beauty is subjective, but it is generally understood to be a person, place, or object that provides the experience of great pleasure to the mind or eye. We know beauty when we see it, but it is hard to define. I can't imagine what it would be like to be really beautiful, but I think it would take a whole lot of work to stay that way. You've probably seen that L'Oreal commercial where a woman says to the camera, “Please don't hate me because I'm beautiful.” I think to myself, “No, I hate you because you are arrogant!” Nevertheless, it can be refreshing when you learn that beautiful people are not always that beautiful, after all.

Take the mug shot, for instance. The mug shot is now an important piece of American culture, don't you wish you had your own? Perhaps you already do. There is book out by Mark Michaelson called Least Wanted: A Century of American Mug Shots. This book contains hundreds of police images of undisclosed people guilty of un-described crimes. We're left to imagine the thousand words behind these photographs. If curiosity gets the best of you, you can head to his photo-sharing site to blog your guesses as to the crimes committed by the captured. Or, if you prefer to see more famous people exposed, you can go to www.thesmokinggun.com to see some incredible mug shots of many beautiful from all walks of life. (Show Mug Shots Here)

The classic mug shot is that of Nick Nolte after being booked on DUI charges, this has to be the scariest mug shot of all time. There is Mel Gibson, who got busted for driving drunk about one year ago in Malibu. All things considered, his mug shot looks pretty good, better than he looked in Braveheart! Hollywood actress and teen idol Lindsey Lohan just can't stay out of trouble, and this shot shows her after being busted for drunk driving and cocaine possession, just a few days after getting out of rehab. Then there is Paris Hilton, have we heard enough about Paris to last a lifetime? This is just one of her shots after she was caught driving with a suspended license and violating probation. There are sports figures, basketball great Allen Iverson booked on gun and assault charges, heavyweight champ Mike Tyson arrested on drunk driving and cocaine possession, NBA star Jason Kidd arrested on domestic abuse charges. Jay Leno said that so many sports figures are in trouble these days that pretty soon ESPN and Court TV will just merge into one channel.

Then there are politicians, like Republican Senator Larry Craig of Idaho, a

terribly sad situation. And in the world of music you would fully expect to see a mug shot of someone like Marilyn Manson, but you might not expect to see mug shots of people like Wynona Judd and one of my perennial favorites, “Rhinestone Cowboy” Glen Campbell, both arrested for DUI.

In his book, Michaelson suggests that one of the most appealing aspects of the mug shot is that things really are just as they seem. No editing. No airbrushing. Nothing like the pictures you see in the magazines. The only thing added is a prisoner ID number. Mug shot images of hard luck moments show people at their worst. It is shocking to see people at their most raw, completely exposed and vulnerable.

As ugly as they may seem to us, I suspect that God loves a mug shot. Stark photos like these, showing people completely exposed, are beautiful in God’s eyes. God consistently demonstrates a preference for the troubled and down and out. God shows sympathy for those who are not beautiful, those whose lives are out of control. Blessed are you when you are at the end of your rope, when you finally hit bottom. Blessed are you when you are booked, photographed and fingerprinted, blessed are you when you are utterly humiliated for all the world to see. Blessed are you when your life gets really, really hard. When the world considers you the ugliest, that’s when you are beautiful to God.

In this light, the Old Testament book of Hosea is a mug shot coffee table book with its own stark images and hard luck stories. Hosea and his family illustrate the human condition at its very lowest. Hosea, wife and kids really have got to be the most dysfunctional family in the world — they make Ozzy Osbourne and tribe look like the Ward, June, Wally and Beaver Cleaver. In the book of Hosea we take a trip down some back alleys of the Bible to see what God considers beautiful.

The first mug shot is of Hosea himself, one of the Minor Prophets, and a priest, who is commanded to marry a “wife of whoredom or harlotry.” Think of the media frenzy that would descend upon this story today: “Preacher marries prostitute!” One picture tells two stories here. Hosea’s marriage is a narrative of God’s fidelity to Israel, God being Hosea and Israel being the prostitute wife. The prophet obeys and takes this woman for a wife, sending a picture of God’s unmerited goodness and unbounded patience. The snapshot of Hosea reminds us God is a patient partner who endures infidelity with grace. Hosea’s obedience is impressive indeed. The text does not say that Hosea thought about marrying Gomer or prayed about it or consulted the wisdom of others or complained to God or chose to find himself a more appropriate wife. It plainly says he went and took Gomer as his wife. Gomer—that name alone would rule her out as a trophy wife.

Anybody tempted to name their baby girl Gomer? In Hebrew it means “To come to an end.”

Her mug shot is even better. Gomer has spent her life seeking comfort and fulfillment in relationships with men. Now married to Hosea, she continues her unfaithful ways, because she becomes quickly bored with prophet Hosea. She goes outside of a relationship of commitment, love and acceptance, and seeks excitement elsewhere. Gomer is a picture of Israel — guilty of idolatry by allowing anything else in life to come before God. But the point is that people are supposed to see themselves in this mug shot of Gomer. We all need to take a hard look at this woman. We’re so uncomfortable with the concept of prostitution that we can hardly see ourselves here, but the image should not be airbrushed away. We are all Gomer, we all are unfaithful to God’s best intentions for us.

Eventually three children are born to Gomer, none of them are Hosea’s. They all have different fathers, and after they are born, Gomer leaves Hosea, not the other way around. She has 3 kids by 3 different men and then she leaves him! But in faithfulness and patience, he brings her back, just as God seeks all who are lost and gone astray. This is an incredible metaphor for the endless love and grace of God.

The son born to Gomer is named Jezreel, which means “God sows” or “scatters.” Lo-ruhamah is the daughter and her name means “Not Pitied.” Imagine the reminder every time this girl was called by name — God will be merciful toward Judah in the south, but will not show pity toward Israel in the north.

Lo-ammi is the second born son, and this name means “Not My People.” The image of this child shows a ruptured relationship. God scatters, Not Pitied, and Not My People, what lovely names.

The alienation of this family reflects the alienation of the Hebrew people from God. Looking at long suffering Hosea, Gomer, Jezereel, Lo-ruhmah and Lo-ammi—we catch a glimpse into the depths of a wounded family. Yet the story doesn’t end with these sad, sorry pictures. In the end, their ugliness becomes beautiful. They are all restored—Hosea brings Gomer back and they live happily ever after. And God says, “The children of Israel shall return and seek their God.”

Some scholars believe the book of Hosea is only a symbolic metaphor for the unfaithfulness of Israel, but it doesn’t really matter. This is a powerful illustration of how God makes something beautiful out of the most sordid situations. Each snapshot in the lineup tells a piece of the story of God and the way God does not give up on us. The New Testament brings the story of Hosea full circle. In First Peter a reference is made to this specific prophetic context. The writer says that the people of God, beautiful or not, are a “...royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own

people....called out of darkness into marvelous light.” It is almost as if the writer then reaches into his hip pocket to produce some mug shots. But now they all look different. They haven’t been photo shopped, but they’ve definitely been grace shopped. “Once you were no people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Peter 2:10).

The U2’s song “Grace” echoes the sentiments of this passage. “What once was hurt, what once was friction, what left a mark, no longer stings. Because grace makes beauty out of ugly things.” Grace makes beauty out of ugly things. That’s exactly what God does with mug shots, with Hosea and his family, and with you, and with me.

Let us pray....

Dear God:

We are so thankful that you see the best in us, even when we are at our worst. We are grateful that you see beauty where we do not, you see goodness where we do not, and you see possibility where we do not. Help us to see ourselves as you see us, and make something truly beautiful of our lives. Help us to see the beauty in other people and in the world around us, as we share the forgiveness and new life that we have found in you. Amen.

Please remain seated as we sing “Something Beautiful”