

Wesley United Methodist Church
September 29, 2019

Text: Jeremiah 31:27-34
Psalm 119:97-104
Title: Hearts Alive

Almost 40 years ago, I was learning to round dance. Round dancing looks a lot like ballroom dancing except that couples move around the floor in a circle and everyone is doing the same movements with a person calling out the steps. It can be very nice to watch a floor of round dancers because it looks like synchronized dancing.

One night our instructor was trying valiantly to teach us the cues to a song called “Tango Minuto”. Everyone seemed to be getting it except me. I was desperately trying to count the beat and keep my feet moving at the same time. My movements were rigid and mechanical, and my timing was slightly off. Someone finally told me to stop trying to count and to just “relax and feel the music”. In frustration, I somewhat loudly responding, “I can’t feel it.”

I was concentrating so hard on doing everything technically correct that I was not enjoying myself; my dancing looked and felt artificial; I was going through the motions but not really living the dance.

This week, the prophet Jeremiah has a vision in which he tells the war-torn, exiled, and divided Israel that there will come a time when God will establish a new covenant with them. The new covenant will be written on their heart. It will no longer require them to read the law and have someone explain to them how to follow it in the many different rhythms of life.

They will “feel it” and know what they should do. They will know what is right and what is wrong, and their desire will be to do what is right. They will obey God not because they are supposed to and fear punishment if they don’t. They will obey God because they want to. Doing what comes naturally will be doing what God wants.

This new covenant sounds wonderful! It also would have sounded extremely radical to those who heard this. The previous covenant was established by God with Moses and the laws that people were to follow were engraved in stone. We know them as the Ten Commandments. But they are like a cliff notes version of the law; a summary or simplified version if you will. The Old Testament contains 613 laws that cover all aspects of life.

Through the years the rabbis and religious authorities worked hard to explain the law and how it functioned in specific circumstances. For example, one of the Ten Commandments is “Thou shalt not kill.” Sounds clear enough, doesn’t it? But what if your country is at war and you are a soldier? What if someone breaks into your home and tries to kill you or your family members? What if your loyal dog is suffering and is in great pain and won’t ever get better? What if...? What if...? It becomes a great deal more complicated doesn’t it? And that’s only one of the commandments.

The Psalmist revered, praised and celebrated the law. Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in the Bible. It has 176 verses and over and over it talks about how great the law is. It is an acrostic poem with each letter of the alphabet being given 8 lines. It is praise for the law that guides, protects, and fulfills the psalmist’s life.

There are 96 verses before and another 72 after this 8-verse section that we heard this morning. In this brief section, the psalmist celebrates that through the law he keeps his feet from every evil way in order to keep God's word. He follows the law not because he is afraid of punishment but because he loves the law; he recognizes how it enriches his life. He says, "how I love your law! It is my meditation all day long ... How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!"ⁱ

Into all this Jeremiah comes with a vision from God of a new covenant. "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." And it continues, "No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest... for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more."

Bill Holladay, one of my seminary professors, and a world recognized authority on Jeremiah wrote a book about Jeremiah designed for people who are not biblical scholars.ⁱⁱ In writing about the new covenant, he noted that in 1952, the British scholar J. B. Phillips, wrote a book that has become a classic called Your God is Too Small. Bill said that the title of this book embodies Jeremiah's message. Jeremiah talks about a God who "constantly has new possibilities up his sleeve, bringing new patterns when the old ones have decayed, bringing new life where there has only been death."ⁱⁱⁱ

Jeremiah's vision of God's new covenant with us has always been one of my favorite passages and I learned something new about it this week. Prophets in the Old Testament frequently refer to other prophets; passages from one book are often found in another, but this radical idea of

a new covenant written on our hearts is “laid aside – never to be touched again in the Old Testament.”^{iv}

Bill says that it wasn’t mentioned again until much later when two dissenting groups of Jews picked it up. The first was the group that produced the Dead Sea Scrolls. They saw this covenant as referring to them because they believed they were God’s favored people. The second group to pick it up were “those led by that highly original theologian, Jesus of Nazareth.”

You may remember that at the last supper, Jesus talked about the cup being the new covenant in his blood (1 Cor. 11:25) paralleling his claim with that of Moses and Sinai. (Exodus 24:8). This new covenant has become part of our vocabulary and in the Epistle to the Hebrews the whole passage from Jeremiah is quoted and applied to Jesus. (Hebrews 8:8-12) In fact, the very phrases “Old Testament” and “New Testament” which we use mean “Old Covenant” and “New Covenant”.^v

We could very well argue that this new covenant has not yet been achieved. We still require religious instruction and we have only to look around us to see that actions that proclaim that God’s law written on our hearts is not the guiding principle for many people. But I guess once again, this has to do with that whole free-will thing that God gave us. God’s vision and desire is for us to have a relationship with God that is so much a part of our lives that following God’s will is as natural as breathing. This is God’s great love for us – that we should be God’s people in every part of our lives.

Jeremiah reminds his people that God has been watching over them during everything that has been happening. In this time of disaster, God says that God will plant seeds of both humans and animals in their homes.

God who has been with them in the time when things have broken down, been overthrown and destroyed promises to also watch over them to build and to plant. In God's original call to Jeremiah, Jeremiah was told that he would be God's voice not because of his own work or the force of his personality, but by God's design and power. "Jeremiah's prophetic message won't be limited by local interests or party politics. God calls Jeremiah to be 'a prophet to the nations'. This call is to assure readers that Jeremiah is a 'truth-teller'. ... He is equipped and charged by God to "dig up and pull down, to destroy and demolish," and then, and this is crucial, "to build and plant."^{vi}

This is part of the building and planting that is to take place. The message continues "In those days they shall no longer say: 'The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.'" This was a common saying at the time and it refers to the idea that they were suffering and facing hardship because they were being punished for the sins of the previous generation. Jeremiah disputes this idea that children will be punished for the sins of their parents. Indeed, throughout the Bible we hear that belief being challenged.

There is no doubt that children often suffer because of the actions of their parents – but this is not punishment for the children. There is no doubt that we live with the consequences of the actions of those who have gone before us, and our children and grandchildren will live with the consequences of our actions – both good and bad – but this is not punishment from God.

We are facing some of the effects of climate change and are being warned repeatedly that we must make serious changes in the way we live or the effects will become only worse and more dangerous. Systemic

racism has resulted in far more black men being in prison than white men and the consequences of this for their children and our culture are very real.

I do not believe that the effects are God's punishment on us or on our children and grandchildren but rather the consequences of our actions and inactions. This is, to my way of thinking, very different than God punishing people; this is not about divine judgment or divine justice; it is about human actions and the consequences that go with those actions.

God does not save us from the consequences of our actions, but neither does God punish us for the actions of another. In fact, in all this talk about building and planting and this new covenant, God says, "I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more."

God will forgive us for the things that we have done that separate us from God. God will lead us back on the path to a renewed and loving relationship with God. God promises that when God forgives our sins, that God will no longer remember our sins. That's pretty amazing, isn't it?

Corrie ten Boom in her book Tramp for the Lord described her image of God's forgiveness. She says, "It was 1947. I had come from Holland to defeated Germany with the message that God forgives. It was the truth they needed most to hear in that bitter, bombed-out land, and I gave them my favorite mental picture. Maybe because the sea is never far from a Hollander's mind, I like to think that that's where forgiven sins are thrown. 'When we confess our sins,' I said, 'God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever. Then God places a sign out there that says, 'No Fishing Allowed.'"^{vii}

God's unconditional forgiveness forms the basis for full restoration of our relationship with God and for healing. The New Covenant that God

writes in our heart frees us from the tyranny of the law and plants the desire to live in harmony and love with God in our very hearts. We best understand this new covenant through Jesus who showed us how to live in this way; who taught us about God's love and desire to be in relationship with each of us, and who modeled that way of life through his life.

ⁱ Psalm 119: 97, 103

ⁱⁱ Holladay, William, Jeremiah: Spokesman Out of Time Pilgrim Press, 1974

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, p.146

^{iv} Ibid, p.120

^v Ibid, p.121

^{vi} CEB Bible, commentary on Jeremiah 1:1-10

^{vii} ten Boom, Corrie. Tramp for the Lord.