

“Written on our Hearts: A New Covenant”

Jeremiah 31:31-33

Message for October 9, 2022

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We live in disruptive times. As we’ve moved through the pandemic and become even more tuned in to the ills of white supremacy, gun violence, and climate change, we’ve used the word, “unprecedented” many times to describe what we all are navigating. Yet there have been comparable times of disruption in the past that left everyone reeling, wondering what on earth and in heaven was going on. Jeremiah lived in such a time – he lived during one of the most troublesome periods in Hebrew history.

Anyone who lives in disruptive times looks for companions who have been through them earlier, wanting to know how they went through it, how they made it, what it was like. Jeremiah is a companion for the worst of times. His life spanned one of the most troublesome periods in Hebrew history, the decades leading up to the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C., followed by the Babylonian exile.

The Book of Jeremiah is primarily a message of judgment on Judah for rampant idolatry. After the death of King Josiah, the last righteous king, the nation of Judah had almost completely abandoned God and God’s commandments. Jeremiah, the prophet, warned Judah that God’s judgment was at hand. Throughout this prophetic book, Jeremiah had a tough message to deliver. As painful as it was for Jeremiah to deliver a consistent message of judgment to his own people, Jeremiah was obedient to what God told him to do and say. He was faithful to his spiritual gift of prophecy.

In today’s text we hear God preparing the people for a new covenant. It helps to remember that a covenant is a pact, a promise, a pledge, a vow, it shapes a bond of trust. God then says that this covenant will include the promise, the agreement between the seeker and the seeking – God and the people: “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.”

This week, the idea of God writing on my heart became a powerful image – especially when thinking about it in the context of our spiritual gifts. In the very first chapter of Jeremiah, the prophet tells us what God said to him:

“Before I shaped you in the womb, I knew all about you. Before you saw the light of day, I had holy plans for you.” This statement is a reminder of how deeply we are known and seen by the divine. In Psalm 139, in the books of Isaiah and Ecclesiastes, in the gospel of Luke, through Paul's words in his letter to the Galatians – we are reminded over and over again throughout the Bible Wisdom teachings that God knows us inside and out – even the very hairs on our head are numbered.

In still other parts of the Bible, we hear repeatedly about this new heart that is written upon, this new covenant, this deep connection between God and the people:

Ezekiel 36:26 A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

2 Corinthians 3:3 And you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

Hebrews 4:12 For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

Hebrews 8:10 This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

What is being written on our hearts? This concept shows up in so many faith traditions! Jews call this word the Law; Christians call it the Logos [the Word of God] or the blueprint; Taoists call it the Eternal Tao; Buddhists call it Emptiness or the Great Compassion; Hindus call it Brahman; Sufi Muslims call it the dance; and science speaks of universal theories. But we are all pointing to one underlying and universal truth that we all strive toward in ten thousand ways.

That truth connects us to “The Great Chain of Being” - the links in creation: (plants, trees, animals, humans). The great chain that connects us all is

always and only love. Connecting more and more of the links of the chain is the supreme work of all true spirituality. A single link is never the full chain.

Somehow the True Self in all humans has natural access to that “hidden” will of God—*if* the mind and heart and body are open and undefended (which is always the spiritual task and not easily achieved). Jeremiah called it “the law written on your heart” (Jeremiah 31:33).

Whether or not we are aware of it, our spiritual gift, our soul’s purpose is written within us. In the Book of Proverbs, we hear: “Your gift opens doors.” And as the Apostle writes in his letter to the people of Rome, “gifts are created in you, and when God’s people are in need, be ready to help them.”

A couple of weeks ago we listened to Paul’s letter to the people of Corinth, as he said, “to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. These ideas, these understandings, these statements create layers of meaning and emphasize the truth that keeps bubbling up throughout the Bible Wisdom teachings.

The “common good” means that we have to rely on the gifts of God given to our brothers and sisters and they have to rely on the gifts entrusted to us. It takes our connection with one another to walk the faithful path. We don’t have what it takes to love God, pray to God, and follow God alone. And that’s really beautiful but not always easy.

This week a parishioner was dealing with anxiety about facing the anniversary of some painful events in their life and at the same time they didn’t want to make too big a deal of it. So, I suggested that they choose a couple people they feel close to at church and ask them to carry it for them. Ask those community members to carry the weight of the anniversary dates on this person’s behalf so they know it’s being done and no longer necessary to be the one carrying that. This person can lean into the gifts the Spirit has granted their brothers and sisters which have been allotted for the common good.

Which I believe in and is all so lovely – until the next day when I had to do the worst thing in the world for a pastor and that is take my own advice.

This ended up being one of my more difficult weeks in recent memory and I found myself having no choice but to rely on the prayers and faith and wisdom and compassion of those brothers and sisters in Christ whom God has put in my life – because frankly I was tapped out. Which is hard because I'd so rather have all the gifts myself and not have to rely on others. But when it feels like a failure on my part that I don't have the faith or compassion or prayer life or wisdom that I need, I just have to remember that the only real failure is when I fail to recognize that I do actually have all the faith and compassion and prayer and wisdom I need – it's just that someone else in my life is holding it for me.

I believe that it is God's intention that we need each other. Not in a creepy co-dependent having no boundaries type of way. But in a bearing the face of Christ kind of way because when I cannot see goodness, when I cannot see hope or beauty or the face of Christ in my own heart, in my own life, and through my own eyes, I need you to do it for me.

As the grains of wheat scattered on the hill are gathered into one to become our bread so too the gifts of the Spirit, scattered among our brothers and sisters, are gathered into one to become our faith, to become our prayer, to become our compassion. Because it's as if this life of faith is a big jigsaw puzzle and each of us have a piece but the only way to see the fullness of God is to bring those pieces God has entrusted to each of us together and then to stand with one another looking at the beauty of it and say, "The gifts of God, for the people of God. Thanks be to God." Amen.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS (at close of message)

- ◇ Do I sense the Law (blueprint) written within me?
- ◇ And if not, what do I do to open myself to the Spirit?
- ◇ How do I move toward the underlying truth within me?
- ◇ In what ways does that truth, reveal to me my spiritual gifts?