

FIRST LESSON: Jeremiah 31:31-34
SECOND LESSON: Hebrews 8: 7-13
March 21, 2021
FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

“The Final Covenant”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

From the prophet Jeremiah we hear, “The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah.” Centuries later the author of Hebrews wrote: “For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. But God found fault with the people. . .” Hebrews then quotes Jeremiah, and concludes with, “By calling this covenant “new,” he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear.” Notice, it’s not really the covenant that was at fault, but the people who were unable to keep it. Hebrews might give the impression that the whole thing is destined for the trash heap, but God’s plan for humanity was good. The problem lay with humanity.

There is no time frame given in Jeremiah for the arrival of the new covenant. The words appear to be directed to the two nations of Israel and Judah, nations that today are no longer separated into tribal groups. Elsewhere scripture in both Old and New Testaments is more universal in nature. But it makes sense that the Jewish nation is being addressed here, because what is being replaced is the Mosaic covenant, a covenant made with the children of Abraham. It is this covenant with its 613 commands that include the Ten Commandments that the people are not capable of keeping. But the central issue—the breaking point as it were—seems to be idolatry. Despite everything God has done the people persist in running after other gods. This is spiritual infidelity. There could be no worse betrayal of God. This is why the imagery of a marriage is invoked. God is like the husband who has been betrayed by a chronically unfaithful wife.

In all of God’s covenantal engagements with humanity, it is God who takes the initiative. In the covenant of Noah, God makes a commitment to all of creation. In the covenant of Moses, God gives the law and makes promises to those who keep the law. But in the new covenant prophesied by Jeremiah, God acknowledges the human race’s complete failure. The new covenant is different in that God promises to help us from the inside out and forgive us when we fail, as we no doubt will. While God still respects human autonomy and freedom, God promises, “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. . . they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.” The new covenant cannot be broken because it does not depend on us. God has set no conditions. Under the new covenant everyone will have direct access to God.

There will be no need for a hierarchy, no need for a priest to make a sacrifice on our behalf.

Where God helps us specifically is with our minds and hearts. But are these even two different things? Is Jeremiah just being poetic? If we take a little detour to another episode of Pastor Lisa's "Fun with Words", the Hebrew and the Greek in these passages is revealing. The Greek is a translation of the Hebrew, so we're dealing with a double translation in this instance. But before we begin, we have to jump off the cliff COMPLETELY and enter a different world, because the ancient world believed that personality was spread throughout the body. The only thing they really couldn't figure a purpose for was that white lump located in the skull. For the Jews, people thought with the heart. The heart was the center of operations, decision making and will, which is why our English version translates their word for heart as our word "mind." The Greeks, on the other hand, divided thinking up into higher level logical and philosophical thinking and lower level "You hurt my feelings and I'm mad at you" thinking. The author of Hebrews chose the higher word for thinking to translate the Hebrew word "heart," and like us called it "mind". What we might call the heart, or the emotional side of things, for Jews is located in the bowels. But somehow "I love you with all of my bowels" just doesn't make it in English. It didn't work in Greek either. The author of Hebrews translated this as "heart" in Greek, which for Greeks was the center of personality, emotions and desire. The heart might urge us to buy ice cream when we should have bought vegetables. The mind will give us a lecture if we do. Before we throw out these understandings altogether, it is interesting to note that we do talk about having "gut instincts" and "gut feelings," and we do use expressions like "knowing in my heart" and having a "broken heart." There is even evidence that a "broken heart" can damage our physical heart. How and what we think does have a physical impact on us.

However we divide personality, and despite the fact that we locate the whole thing in the brain, the point of all this is that God has covered all the bases. Everything from high intellectual pursuits to pure emotion is covered. We still intellectually separate out these parts of ourselves when we talk about the human mind and personality even if we don't attribute them to different organs. But God addresses the whole self—all of us—from the logical to the irrational, the parts that want to do what is right, and that inner child stomping his or her feet and screaming "No!" God promises help from within, and it you're one of those people whose inner psyche sometimes feels like a daycare center that's really good news, because there is a difference between having external rules and an internal helper.

It is the Holy Spirit who is our helper; the Spirit who works in our minds and hearts. And the Spirit comes to us as part of the new covenant. On the night he was betrayed Jesus took the cup and said, "This is the cup of the new covenant sealed in my blood, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink it, do this in remembrance of me." Jesus died for us and rose again, and to those who believe in Jesus God sends the Holy Spirit. Where once the Spirit's anointing only came to prophets and rulers in times of crisis, the Spirit is now poured out on all flesh. It is the Spirit who enables us to know God and to experience God.

So, wait a minute, we ask, why aren't we all perfect, then? And why aren't those people out there who claim to be filled with the Spirit the most perfect of all? Why aren't the ones prophesying, speaking in tongues and laying hands on people to be healed positively reeking with perfection? How is it those mega-church pastors keep getting caught committing adultery or raiding the church coffers?

In practice the Holy Spirit fills us to the level we allow the Spirit to fill us. When we surrender our lives fully to God holding back nothing, God can fill us in a way that is truly transforming. I don't know what kind of spirit those people are full of, but my experience of the Holy Spirit has been a bit different. I believe in the gifts of the Spirit. I have exercised the gifts of the Spirit. But my most powerful experience of the Holy Spirit was when I first came to faith and promptly got given two tons of conviction of sin. I was in a relationship that was wrong, and I ended it. Quickly. And all kinds of other things started to light up too. As I said last week, being filled with the Holy Spirit is like suddenly having a conscience on steroids. It's like someone switched the light on. But for God to say, "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts" does not mean that God has made us puppets. I may know in my mind what is right and what is wrong. I may suffer with feelings of guilt if I do wrong. But I'm still capable of doing wrong. The strength to do right is there. But the ability to choose wrong is also still there.

God's final covenant to us imperfect human beings is a covenant of grace and mercy. God sent us Jesus because Jesus could do what we could not—be perfect and human at the same time. We have been forgiven through Jesus. And we have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit to give our minds and hearts the grace and strength they need. How deeply and freely the Spirit is able to work in our lives is up to us. Amen.

Jeremiah 31:31-34

³¹ "The days are coming," declares the Lord,
"when I will make a new covenant
with the people of Israel
and with the people of Judah.

³² It will not be like the covenant
I made with their ancestors
when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of Egypt,
because they broke my covenant,
though I was a husband to them,"
declares the Lord.

³³ "This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel
after that time," declares the Lord.
"I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.
I will be their God,

and they will be my people.
³⁴ No longer will they teach their neighbor,
or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,'
because they will all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest,"
declares the Lord.
"For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more."

Hebrews 8: 7-13

⁷ For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. ⁸ But God found fault with the people and said: "The days are coming, declares the Lord,
when I will make a new covenant
with the people of Israel
and with the people of Judah.

⁹ It will not be like the covenant
I made with their ancestors
when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of Egypt,
because they did not remain faithful to my covenant,
and I turned away from them,
declares the Lord.

¹⁰ This is the covenant I will establish with the people of Israel
after that time, declares the Lord.
I will put my laws in their minds
and write them on their hearts.

I will be their God,
and they will be my people.

¹¹ No longer will they teach their neighbor,
or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,'
because they will all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest.

¹² For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more."

¹³ By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear.