

“On Our Hearts”
Jeremiah 31:31-34
The Rev. Joyce Kirk-Moore
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In the news this past Friday perhaps you heard the story about the scientific study done on the effectiveness of prayer. I was standing at the stove putting together dinner when overheard Brian Williams give the headline and then he said: “Does science have any business addressing issues of faith?” It was a bad piece of reporting. Very little details were given. Martin Marty, a great religious scholar and communicator, was shown giving a short quote which didn’t even lend itself to the story; it was almost like they just needed to get his face and a quote in the segment. Then it dawned on me why this story made the headlines at all. It probably was a way for the network to seize an opportunity to profit from what has become “the culture wars.”

It is too bad that the culture wars have focused less on the gospel as a whole and primarily on a few issues like abortion, gay rights, and creationism versus evolution. Because behind the culture wars is, I think, a question that strikes at people’s hearts: “Why do I exist and what gives my life meaning?” The year 2000 was announced as the “decade of spirituality” and yet, sometimes it seems we seek spirituality within very limited paradigms. People are desperately trying to answer these questions of “Why am I here and what will give my life meaning?”

I processed Friday’s news story of the effectiveness of prayer on healing with the scientist with whom I live. Tom said that this study is a prime example why science and religion are completely different realms of inquiry and why it is futile to link them. The discipline of science cannot quantify the realm of the spirit. But that doesn’t mean that a scientist cannot be a person of profound faith.

Every physicist in Tom’s department practices their faith. There are no atheists in his physics department; in fact, there are devout Christians, Jews, Greek Orthodox, and Hindu. And they all believe in evolution. That doesn’t mean they don’t believe that the Divine creative force was and is not part of the origins of life. In the United Church of Christ we worship with people who believe in creationism and we worship with those who don’t. Most of all, we need to put this battle between science and religion to rest because it is a smoke screen to hide behind and allows us to avoid harder questions of faith.

It’s not the first time in history that a smoke screen has allowed people to hide instead of facing tough questions about what it means to be faithful. Israel found itself doing something similar except that the temple cult had become their smoke screen so that they could go and pay the priest, say their prayers, condemn those who didn’t, and then “forget about it” during the week. As long as they hid behind their religiosity, they didn’t have to deal with critical issues around them. They didn’t have to notice what God was calling them to do and be in the real world. They’d done their duty to God on the Sabbath, and God would protect and sustain them. This kind of perfunctory worship had become a heartless act of self-assurance.

In the meantime, the beloved community as God had envisioned Israel had become fragmented between rich and poor, satisfied and suffering, powerful and powerless. The temple had become an idol to which the people chanted “the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.” They believed as long as they had their temple; God was on their side. But the temple had become a sanctuary not of God but an idol to take God’s place. The theme of the prophet Jeremiah’s sermons was pretty simple. Israel had made an idol of temple worship; they no longer worshiped God with all their hearts, minds, and souls. And Israel had ignored their responsibilities to the community that God so loved. These were the sins the prophet Jeremiah declared would lead to Israel’s destruction.

These beautiful words of hope in Jeremiah 31:31 are part of what is called “The Book of Consolation” made up of chapters 30-33. But all around these words of consolation are doom and gloom. Israel was going to hell in a hand-basket. God placed a call on Jeremiah to declare harsh consequences. Jeremiah’s was not a happy life. He did not take pleasure in being the voice of doom and gloom. He was a man of sorrow, and spent years lonely and excommunicated from family and community.

He did really weird things, too, like smash a piece of pottery and tell the nation it would be smashed just like that. He wore a yoke to demonstrate how Israel should submit to Babylon’s greater military power because this suffering was part of God’s redemptive work for a future. Jeremiah said it’s going to get worse before it gets better. They didn’t like this sermon very much. He was pretty much fired as preacher and prophet. Yet, it is in this moment of history that Jeremiah writes these incredibly hopeful prophetic words of a future yet to be. Though God might be delivering “tough love” in the present, the future was still God’s, and God was going to force a change from the inside out.

The temple rites and laws that provided a smoke screen for the idolatry and moral decay of Israel would no longer be the ultimate measure of faithfulness. Rather, God was going to write faithfulness on the hearts of the community so that it would be one with the very thing that gave them life. They could no longer escape God by the hypocrisy of a look-good, feel-good religion. Exile and defeat were Israel’s Good Friday. Their faithlessness is repeated many years later in the events of Jesus’ life. Everything old was new again. The temple priests rejected Jesus’ message. Those in power hid behind their positions that protected them.

It seemed it was only the poor, sick, powerless, and generally disenfranchised that understood Jesus’ words. Each week we move closer to Good Friday 2006, and we recall the events of long ago, and we have a chance to ask ourselves the question: “Do we get it any better today?” The promise of a new covenant written on the hearts of God’s people is a promise to us also. Every time we share Holy Communion we are lifting up for all to see God’s promise that our lives can be entertained with the Divine. When we drink the cup and eat the bread we are accepting our part of that covenant.

The writer, Parker Palmer, says: ‘true’ covenant ‘means the acceptance of weighty obligations to a Lord who demands that we ‘do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God’. The church accepting this true covenant would ‘serve as a channel of reconciliation in a world in love with divisions...the church would proclaim not its mastery over the world but its servant hood--to

God, to humankind, and to the vision of a peaceable kingdom. (In the Company of Strangers.) Our “still speaking” God is ready “pen in hand” to continually write on our hearts new ways of being. Sometimes we are afraid to submit to the Good Friday’s of our lives but they lead us to a resurrection that is much more than we ever thought possible. In the midst of Israel’s downfall, Jeremiah writes of what comes further down the road: “For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.” (29:11)