

“Deep In Our Hearts”

Jeremiah 31:31-34

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Rev. Joyce Kirk-Moore

San Dimas Community Church, United Church of Christ

Easy answers are hard to come by. I often talk with people who are searching for easy answers. I, myself, am jealous of people who seem to have easy answers! In faith discussions, people want easy answers so that they feel secure that they know just what they should do to be right with God. They want to be faithful, and sometimes they want a “to do list” to help them be faithful. I’m not saying that one shouldn’t think about what they ought “to do” for the glory of God, but our text today says that Israel’s relationship with God is more about things of the heart, than even commandments written on stone tablets.

Those ten commandments (comprehensive though they are) are too easy to set-aside, dismiss out of mind, wait for a more convenient time with which to comply. So this text says, the God-human relationship is a matter of the heart, and God will write a new covenant on Israel’s heart that cannot be in any way, shape, or form be interpreted as an easy answer.

Remember that Israel is still in exile in Babylon (and we’re still wandering through Lent), but we’re almost to where we can see the end--Palm Sunday next week, then the tenuous trek through Holy Week as we go to the depths of darkness where the light (and the answers) are hidden because after all, we are only human. And then only after the cross, *only after the cross*, the new possibilities that come with resurrection. There are no easy answers for us just as there were no easy answers while Israel sat by the waters of Babylon weeping.

It took me about 30 years to learn that things were not absolute, right or wrong, that there were indeed murky shades of gray that I just had to dwell uncomfortably within. When so much is at stake for our “being right and doing the right thing” how can one accept that there are no easy answers? I wanted truth with a capital T, absolute and defining.

I remember as a new mother reading all the books, trying to figure out exactly the right things to do for my child, worrying I wasn’t doing things right. Finally, a good and wise friend told me just to enjoy this new life, this new baby girl that I was given to share! I learned through the years that parenting is a relationship embedded deep in our hearts, with very few really easy answers. As my children grew up, the answers got even harder, or perhaps they just didn’t like my answers, and I realized that we were now in a new covenant with one another, and that out of our relationship, that involved commitment, love, talking, even more listening, negotiating, and sometimes even accepting their decisions whether I liked them or not, the deep in our hearts stuff was what made us forever family.

It took Israel a long time to learn that God was into relationship building and out of relationship flows devotion and obedience. It wasn’t enough to recite 10 rules or even create more rules, rules they imagined would please God. Just like Israel people of faith today seem to require learning and relearning that religion is a matter of the heart. So in this beautiful passage, God says that God will make a new covenant, requiring even more than the 10 commandments given to their ancestors. The 10 commandments were good but had themselves become like a “to do list” hanging on a child’s bedroom door--easy to ignore. Now Israel and God were to be bound by a new covenant written on their hearts, deep in their hearts, so that it was integral with their being alive.

Just as a human heart pumps life giving blood throughout the human body nourishing it and keeping it alive physically, God’s inscription on the hearts of both Israel and of us keeps us alive in spirit. God embedded deep in our hearts requires much more of us than stone tablets ever could. It demands our very lives! I know that sometimes people think that the United Church of Christ doesn’t demand enough of its members; we do not have a denominational creed to abide

by. We have great diversity in thought, theology, and faith, and we are committed to honoring this diversity. But what we do have is a commitment to relationship; relationships with each other and with God. We promise ourselves to God and community from a place deep in our hearts. Relationships are hard; they take work and require time. They can be fragile, and they require nurturing. Relationships are dynamic, that is, they are live entities that evolve and what may be needed at one time to sustain the relationship may very well change.

The way we parent a 6 year old is much different than a 16 year old. Our relationships with each other require flexibility and attentiveness and great care. And our relationship with God which calls us to act with love and justice requires different kinds of actions depending on the context in which we live and work and love. If I lived in Africa, or Palestine, or Afghanistan, my relationship with God would call me to quite different and specific acts of relationship building. Since I live near here, it calls me to be attentive to the whole world and to be attentive to our food pantry and to our children who are here for me to love and nurture and to the elders of our community who have worked their whole lives to be the face of God in this town.

The constitution of the United Church of Christ call it members to take the historic faith and make it our own in this time and in the context in which we find ourselves. Now this necessitates a high level of trust. And trust can sometimes be betrayed. And sometimes (not always) trust that has been betrayed can be healed.

At our fundamental core as people, we want to be able to trust that we will be loved for who we are and who we may become. This is why these verses from our text are so important: “I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.” (verse 34) It would be very hard for me to take the journey into Lent if I did not know that on the other side would be a God waiting for me, forgiving me, loving me for all the good and bad that I am, and still wanting to be in relationship with me. Such radical trust invites us to trust the processes of life, including our religion, to unfold before us with the voice of God who is still speaking. Creation is not a fait accompli. Creation happens all around us, all the time. And we can join the process and become co-creators with God trusting that even though we make mistakes or downright sin, nothing is impossible with God; the mercies of God break forth new every day.

Could it be that sometimes we don't trust ourselves to live in faithful relationship and that is why we need to be able to check off “a list of righteousness?” God says right here that God trust us so much that God will rely on our hearts to tell us what to do. God says right here that we will come to know God, and “to know” in Hebrew meant an intimacy that made two people one. That's how much God trusts us.

Could it be that sometimes we don't trust others enough to live in relationship with them? Some of us have good reasons to be wary of trusting others. We've been betrayed, burned, abused. God does not ask us to naively trust those who would harm us. But just because we can't trust some people doesn't mean that relationships are not fundamentally important to human community. We were made to live in community; we seek communities in which we can be ourselves and become ourselves as we grow.

Process theologians believe that God is a relational God; God is embedded within the relationships of all creation; God is a dynamic, involving, loving, and consistence force for good in the world. It is encouraging to me to be reminded of God's love for ancient ancestors of our faith, a love that stayed with them, nipping at their heels, no matter how far they wished to escape. Because that kind of God, who never gives up, who never turns back, who longs for relationship is a big enough God in whom I can believe in from the depths of my heart, and it is to the God of relationships that I choose to give my life and my all. AMEN