

March 17, 2024, Fifth Sunday in Lent/ Jeremiah 31:31-34 ---Pastor Laurie Lynn Newman

My parents and brother and I always lived far away from our extended family, but once a year, we drove from East Tennessee, to Texas, to visit Grandpa Archie and Grandma Jean. As the oldest grandkid, I was especially close to Grandma Jean. When I was twelve, (in a time long before texting and Facebook were options), I was concerned that we had so little time together. Our phone conversations were limited. But I was determined to stay close to her. I hit upon the idea of regularly writing grandma illustrated letters, so that she could keep up with the things happening in my life. I had my colored pencils, and enjoyed figuring out what parts of my story to illustrate.

She always wrote back, in elegant handwriting-- long letters describing farm life and weather in the Texas panhandle. This mutual practice not only kept us in touch, but I learned that there was something mysterious, almost magical, about the eye-hand-heart coordination of hand-writing letters. Her perspective helped me to care about what she cared about. Somehow, in the physical writing of words, and drawings, with my hands, my interior life was changed, and deepened. Many years later, after she died, as we cleaned out her house, I discovered that she had kept all of my letters to her. Our relationship was made intimate through that regular correspondence. She is written in my heart.

Through Jeremiah, God speaks: “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. ³⁴No 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. . .”

The metaphor in Jeremiah, (as in some other prophets) is an intimate relationship between God and the people—the language is that of a marriage covenant. Thus, the contract isn’t so much about being taught how to live it, and being held accountable by a code etched on tablets, but knowing God from within, with the heart.

The “heart” in Hebrew thinking, wasn’t about the seat of emotions, but heart is the center of mind, will and action. Heart was the driver of choice and purpose. With God’s law “written on the heart”—living in God’s way would be second nature, in close relationship with God, and caring about what God cares about: namely, justice and inclusion for the most vulnerable, care for all creation, and keeping love of God primary in heart, soul, mind and strength.

The passage from Jeremiah 31 makes us curious: what is the contrast between the old covenant and the new one? What does it mean to have the law within us, written on our hearts? This introspective time of Lent invites us to consider--how is God’s love embodied in our mind, heart and action?

The old covenant, was the one given to Moses, on Mt. Sinai. It was the law for God’s people liberated from slavery in Egypt. Like other legal covenants of the Ancient Near East, the old covenant, was written on tablets. The first rule was “Have no other gods than Yahweh.” Remember? That was the law the people broke this one right off the bat, by worshipping the idol cast in gold.

This contrasts with the covenant expressed by Jeremiah. It states what came before was a law that kept needing to be taught. The covenant was meant to keep right relationship with God,

and one another. But, it required teaching, interpretation, and enforcement. Thinking back to the letter-writing practice with Grandma Jean—if my parents had forced me to write weekly, it would have been an entirely different experience.

There's a difference between following the rules, because we are forced to, and being changed from within, from love. For example, we can look to our current state of affairs. We can see that there's a big difference between current, written, laws prohibiting sexism, racism, and discrimination, based upon sexual orientation. . .and true acceptance of the "other", regardless of gender, race, and sexual orientation. It's the difference between a law and enforcement, and a radical change of heart, and action.

For Christian ears, when we hear "new covenant" we are quick to remember Jesus' words, at the last supper with his disciples. "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for the forgiveness of sin." Obviously, this was not what Jeremiah was referring to, as Jeremiah came long before Jesus. But, in our experience and context, we can make a meaningful connection. That, the covenant Jesus promises us, is a transformation of our hearts, and the embodiment of God in us, expressed in our renewed lives to love and to forgive.

Over the years, I've had countless conversations with people about the trouble with forgiveness, when there has been a marriage betrayal, a broken partnership, and the abandonment of relationship in a divorce. These are among the most difficult situations in which to find forgiveness. Quite honestly, some unhealthy forms of Christianity, in my opinion, are too quick to rush to forgiveness, without addressing basic patterns and hurts, that need to be brought to light. So, this prophetic metaphor of God's marriage to us can really get at the root of our most difficult experiences. When we are "written on the hearts" of one another—how do we withstand the failures, the broken promises, the dashed hopes of life-long love? I believe that it is the transforming grace of God that makes it possible.

I was divorced in 2011. At the time, I was concerned that as a pastor, I'd be judged harshly, for not having made the marriage last. I was worried about how to explain things to people in my congregation. But, here's what happened. After the divorce, I took some time off. When I came back to work, there was a bouquet of yellow roses from the chair of the personnel committee, and a handwritten letter that she left in my office. Her letter shared some of her own experience of divorce. She didn't pry into what happened in my life. She simply reminded me of being loved by God, by the congregation, and offered her prayers and kindness. It was a moment of feeling deeply loved by God. As I look back on this, I realize that all the kindness and love offered to me on that difficult journey, helped me to arrive, eventually, at a place of forgiveness for myself, and for my ex-husband. This "new covenant", written on our hearts, is the source of forgiveness, and the source of new life. What, and whom, is God writing on your heart today? What is being transformed?