

“The Law Written on Our Hearts”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
Lent V – March 22, 2015

**Jeremiah 31: 31-34**

“The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant . . .”

The husband and wife built their home in their neighborhood over fifty years ago, one of the first to settle in that area, which at the time was on the outskirts of the city. They raised their children in that house, watched each of them grow up, graduate from high school, go on to start lives of their own. They witnessed the city build up around them, neighbors coming and going, and gradually new challenges arose. Crime was more prevalent than it used to be. The neighbors came from different cultures and backgrounds than the husband and wife. Homes were not kept as nicely as they once were when they first moved in. Their children came back and asked, “Why don’t you move – we’re concerned about your safety.” They remained in that home that they built, but their anxiety was palpable. They yearned for the days of the past, when things seemed safer and happier. But they also were concerned over what might happen to them. Is there hope here? Can something new take place?

“I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts . . .”

The church had been full of energy and people from its beginning in the heydays of American religion in the 1950s and ‘60s. Bursting Sunday School classes; expanding buildings; additional worship services – the church was active and vibrant and the center of people’s social lives. Of course, that was before the changes in today’s modern culture: 24-hour news, the internet and smartphones, expansion of activities into Sundays, and so on. Like others in similar situations, the church began to see a drop-off in their numbers: attendance, giving, participation. The community surrounding the church had changed, and those who attended no longer lived predominantly close to the church, but drove 10, 15, 20 minutes at minimum. The community now had people who spoke different languages, who had greater needs, who did not look like the people who attended church on Sunday. The church faced a decision. Would they seek to reclaim the glory days of the past, basing their decisions on increasing numbers and how to provide for their “membership?” Or would they look outward and seek to serve their neighbors, the least of these in their midst, and trust that with God all things are indeed possible? Would the law be external to their lives, or would it be internal, written on their hearts?

“For they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.”

The falling out had been brutal, painful, and ugly. Once they had been great friends, brought together by shared interests and a love of life that fed one another deeply. The one even invited the other to church, and they became inseparable as leaders in various ministries within the church. But they didn't always agree on everything, and one day those differences of opinion crossed the line. One offered a critique of a program the other was championing, and it was taken personally, even though it wasn't meant as a personal attack. The spiral was in motion, and within days, the two had built walls between one another that were rigid and thick. They sought to maneuver around the walls by talking to third-parties, wanting to build alliances and discredit the other in one fell-swoop. It was painful for those who loved them, who cared for them, but who couldn't stand to see this once treasured friendship deteriorate into bitterness, distrust, and disdain. Could there ever be hope for reconciliation? Where might forgiveness offer healing? Could there be an honest acknowledgment of sin on everyone's part, so that something new could be reclaimed from what once was a beautiful gift?

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

The Book of Jeremiah is unique in that it spans the time period before, during, and after the exile of the Israelites into Babylon in 587 BCE. This passage that we have read today was likely written while Jeremiah remained behind, but the prophet certainly was impacted by witnessing his people experience pain, suffering, and anxiety in the midst of a deep crisis. For Jeremiah, it is a crisis of their own doing: it was the Israelites who broke God's law after "I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt - a covenant they broke." Throughout this prophetic book, Jeremiah is clear that the Israelites have only themselves to blame for the mess they are in, as they did not honor the covenant God had made with them.

And yet, despite their unfaithfulness and sinfulness, God would not abandon them, would not forsake them. God would do something that was of God's own doing - not of his own people's doing - and it would be new and full of hope and promise. It would not be a law written on stone tablets, written on pieces of paper, written in words that can easily be forgotten or ignored or rationalized out of. No, it would be a law that is literally "put within them, and I will write it on their hearts." It will be a covenant grounded in grace, forgiveness, and love - not romantic love, but agape love, sacrificial love, deep, transformational love. It will be evident by their actions towards the least to the greatest, for they will all know the Lord. It will be a covenant that, as we say in the communion liturgy, is "sealed in my blood for the forgiveness of sins."

Stacey Elizabeth Simpson writes: Think of tattoos or brands. They are more or less permanent. Whatever symbol a person chooses says something about him or her. That's why tattoos and brands are chosen in the first place - as a mark of identity. Pain, indelibility, identity. These are the central aspects of what it means to be marked. If it didn't involve pain, it wouldn't be indelible: marks that don't hurt are the ones that wash off.

Pain, indelibility, and identity are also the hallmarks of God writing the covenant on the heart of the people. This is chiefly a consoling passage, but the pain of God inscribing himself into souls must not be romanticized. God is invading the heart. Yes, this will make them God's people, but it also will mean a death of the self, and a radical transfer of allegiance from all systems and claims. This is not the people overcoming their sinful natures; this is God overcoming the people.

The covenant brands us as "God's people." It is an internal identity that will be evidenced by external behavior. We will live God's law not because we are obliged to but because we want to, because our hearts are shaped that way ("Branded by God," *Christian Century*, October 18, 2000: 1035).

We will live God's law because we want to, because our hearts are shaped that way.

What would it look like for us to live God's law because we want to, because our hearts are shaped that way?

Does that older couple view their situation through the lens of fear, or through the lens of opportunity? Do they remember what it was like to welcome new people who moved to their neighborhood in the past, and not be afraid to do the same today, even if their neighbors speak halting English, or have multiple family members living under one roof? Do the differences with their neighbors carry more weight than what they might have in common? Can they trust completely in the God of this new covenant, who promises to always be their God?

Does that church view their situation through the lens of fear, or through the lens of opportunity? Do they think first about the organization's survival, how best to "secure" the church's future, and look primarily inward in mission and ministry? Or do they think first about their community, their neighbors, how best to "secure" their community's well-being, and look primarily outward in mission and ministry? Can they trust completely in the God of this new covenant, who promises to always be their God?

Do those two individuals who have fallen out of friendship view their situation through the lens of fear, or through the lens of opportunity? Are they entrenched in their view of right and wrong, believing that the other is totally at fault? Or is the desire for reconciliation greater than their own individual pride? Can they lay down the pain, take the risk of confession, and seek mutual forgiveness? Can they trust completely in the God of this new covenant, who promises to always be their God?

As we prepare for Holy Week, may our hearts be shaped in the way of God's law of love, so that everyone we encounter might know the breadth and depth of God's love for the world in Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God. Amen.