I.
The written word—the text—is a fragile thing. That is my first takeaway from our text for today.

It is Pie Sunday at Plymouth Church! Today, we gather in our pledges and gorge on simple carbohydrates; we give thanks for our many blessings and look forward in hope to all that God has yet to do. We are here to give thanks — and I’ll get there, I promise. But not so fast. First, I need to linger a little with this strange story.

Our reading from Jeremiah is pretty obscure. I logged a lot of hours in Sunday School, studied the Bible in college, went to seminary (twice!). But I have never spent much time with this story. From last week — when we heard about Isaiah’s call to prophetic ministry — we have skipped ahead about two centuries. And the focus shifts from Isaiah to Jeremiah. Isaiah was an insider, a prophet on the royal payroll, an advisor to the king. But Jeremiah is a prophet with a decidedly different MO. He is an outsider. He is remembered, sometimes, as “the weeping prophet,” and for good reason. Jeremiah is charged with a message that he does not want to preach, a message that no one wants to hear: Time’s up. The injustice, the idolatry, the faithlessness of God’s people cannot be undone. God’s judgment is near. If something does not change, right now, the hated Babylonian Empire will conquer the nation of Judah and the people will be led off to live
in bitter exile.

Jeremiah doesn’t get invited to a lot of parties. The palace doesn’t return his calls. He is on the outside looking in.

But God…persists. And God insists on getting this message through. If Jeremiah cannot get invited into the presence of the king, perhaps a letter will persuade the king. So Jeremiah dictates his prophetic message to Baruch, and Baruch writes it all down and gets it delivered to the king.

But the written word is a far too fragile thing. That’s what the story seems to say. The epistle arrives and is carried to the king. The king luxuriates in his winter quarters—it’s cozy and snuggly; there is a fire in the fireplace and drinks are being served. Jehudi, who I imagine as the king’s body man — think Dulé Hill’s character on The West Wing — Jehudi reads the letter to the king, who snorts and rolls his eyes and swishes his brandy around like some sort of cartoon villain. After every couple of columns are read, the king slices up the letter, tosses it in the fire and feels maybe more than a little smug. Jeremiah and Baruch tried. And they will try again; they will draft another letter. But they do not have much hope of success.

The written word is a far too fragile thing.

II.
The written word is fragile. The written word often fails to get through. But you don’t need the Book of Jeremiah to tell you that. All you have to do is study a little history, or maybe pick up a newspaper.

The United States has always had a peculiar relationship with the Bible. We often revere it, occasionally read it and seldom put it into practice.
The pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock toting their Geneva Bible — then they mistreated the natives and burned witches. In the decades before the Civil War, churches were packed with people eagerly listening to sermons about how the Bible sanctions human slavery. And a century after that, preachers preached and churches rallied to defend systems of racial segregation as God’s unchangeable will.

We revere the Bible, but it does not seem to make us a better people. Right now, today, in our allegedly Christian nation, we are seeing a disturbing rise in incidents of violence directed at the most vulnerable among us. We’re seeing it right here in Iowa. In Burlington, an openly gay Presbyterian minister by the name of Randy Lee Webster found a note stuck between the windshield wiper blades of his car. It taunted him for being gay. One line of it read: “They’ll put marriage back where God wants it and take yours away.” In Iowa City, Amar Samel — an American citizen originally from Sudan, a husband, a father, a custodian at Iowa City West High School — Amar Samel came home from his father’s funeral to find a handwritten note taped to his front door. I cannot read the whole thing from the pulpit, but part of it said, “You can all go home now. We don’t want terrorists here. #Trump.” And here in Des Moines, last Sunday afternoon, an African-American woman named Kristen Grant came home to find the words “White Power” scrawled on her front door in permanent marker.

The Bible has been in America for 400 years, but its influence has been limited. We believe in the Bible and behave like this.

The text is a far too fragile thing. Kings can burn it. Tyrants can twist it. Creative preachers can quote it to advance the interests of evil.

The Bible may not be enough.

III.
I think Jeremiah gets it. I think he understands. And in the second section of our reading — this brief bit from chapter 31 — the prophet seems to see a way forward. If God
cannot communicate with words written on paper, then God will find another way. And if a letter will not get the message across, God will just have to send us.

*The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.* 32 *It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors.* A new covenant. Something different. Not written with pen or paper or pixels. A covenant inscribed on our hearts. God’s law will not be safely shut up inside some dusty book that we never take down and read. God’s law will live in us. God’s spirit will speak through us. We will all know the LORD. We will all be changed. The text is a far too fragile thing. So God will send a people instead. The word will be inscribed on our hearts.

IV.
I promised that I would get around to giving thanks, so here it is: I am thankful for you. I am grateful for Plymouth Church. The word is being inscribed on our hearts. And what we do around here has never mattered more.

Ever since the election, I have been doing a lot of listening. I have listened to members of this church who did not vote for President-Elect Trump, people who are hurting and anxious and afraid. I have listened to members of this church who did vote for President-Elect Trump. They are hurting too, and a bit bewildered by the reactions they have seen. Some of us wonder if we will be safe. Some of us wonder if we will be welcome.

Now of course, agreeing to differ is nothing new for Plymouth Church. It’s right there in our motto: *We agree to differ.* Even when we have serious disagreements, even when we experience our differences as deeply painful, we keep showing up for each other. I love that about this church.

But agreeing to differ is not enough. The motto does not end there; we have more work to do. *We resolve to love. We unite to serve.*
On Pie Sunday, we give thanks for all of our blessings. We turn in our pledges for the year to come, believing our best work still lies ahead. And we double down on our commitment to being the church for a time such as this love.

_We resolve to love. We unite to serve._ Because we have a whole lot to do together. Our homeless neighbors still need to be housed and fed. Our refugee neighbors still need access to literacy programs. Grieving people still need the listening ear of a Stephen Minister. Women out of work still need the Plymouth Women Career Closet to help them get ready for interviews. Families like mine still need this village to help us raise our children.

Most of all, our neighbors need to know that they are not alone. Our LGBT neighbors. Our black and brown neighbors. Our undocumented neighbors. Our Muslim neighbors. Our neighbors need to know that somebody loves them fiercely; that somebody has their backs.

The text is too fragile. Mere words will never get the job down.

But God’s love will be inscribed on our hearts. God’s work will be done with our hands.

The text is too fragile. That is why God gives us a church.

And I am so grateful.

Plymouth Congregational Church
United Church of Christ
4126 Ingersoll Avenue
Des Moines, Iowa 50312
Phone: (515) 255-3149 Fax: (515) 255-8667
E-mail: mmardis-lecroy@plymouthchurch.com
Notes


ii For more on Jeremiah’s nickname, see John C. Holbert’s reflections here: http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Weeping-Prophet-Reflections-on-Jeremiah

iii Historian Mark Noll explores the biblical and theological rationale put forward by many preachers in the antebellum south in his remarkable little book, “The Civil War as a Theological Crisis.” More here: http://uncpress.unc.edu/books/T-7959.html

iv The Rev. Dr. Phil Snider of Brentwood Christian Church in Springfield, MO drew on the history of these kinds of arguments to expose the emptiness of those who oppose same-sex marriage on religious grounds: http://www.patheos.com/blogs/friendlyatheist/2012/10/20/a-preacher-gives-a-familiar-speech-against-gay-rights-but-with-a-surprising-twist/


