

Growing Together in the Way of Jesus: Written on the Heart

A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
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Jeremiah 31:31-34, Luke 18:18-25

Today our series of sermons on texts that shaped Jesus—and by extension shape us—continues with a look at Jeremiah 31:31-34. This text falls within what is known as the Little Book of Consolation, chapters 30-33 of Jeremiah. These chapters provide us with words of comfort addressed by the prophet to a people who have been taken, or are about to be taken, into exile in 587 BCE, carried away from a city and a land that they loved. Notice how Jeremiah foretells a reversal. Note what he says about the new covenant. Now imagine Jesus, 600 years later, hearing these words in temple and synagogue.

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. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: 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. No 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, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Our second bit of scripture comes from the Gospel of Luke. It's the story, told in all of the gospels but John, of how a rich young ruler comes to Jesus asking to inherit eternal life—and what Jesus tells him in response. As you hear it, think about what it might be saying about the law written on a person's heart.

A certain ruler asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honor your father and mother." ' He replied, 'I have kept all these since my youth.' When Jesus heard this, he said to him, 'There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' But when he heard this, he became sad; for he was very rich. Jesus looked at him and said, 'How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.

On Mondays, when I take my Sabbath, I often play tennis. This past Monday on the court, something remarkable happened. No, it's not that I managed to triumph handily over my opponent, whose initials happen to be MF if you're scoring at home, Mark.

The remarkable thing was that something seemed to click into place, after all these years. After years of tennis games, my serve all of the sudden came naturally and with power.

Now, I've been around long enough to know that sometimes moments like that are fleeting. Little shifts in mechanics can throw you right off again. But this time felt a bit different. Like I had internalized something, way down deep. It was almost like it had finally been etched into my muscle memory.

It remains to be seen whether that will stick, and I'm not taking bets that it will. But it does make me think about the prophet Jeremiah telling his hearers on God's behalf that the days were coming when God would make a new covenant with them. A new covenant, not like the old one that they broke, after God brought them out of Egypt.

In this new covenant God's law would be written on their hearts and not on tablets of stone. It would be internal, not external. Doing the right thing, the loving thing, would be so ingrained in them that it would come naturally. It would be an inside job, not something that they did because it was commanded from the outside, but because it was *enabled* from the inside. A *new* covenant.

When Jesus came along almost 600 years later, there was little indication during those intervening years that this promised new covenant that Jeremiah foretold had ever really clicked in. There was no indication that God's law of love had been etched into people's hearts and had somehow stuck. It was still an external thing.

I can imagine Jesus growing up, hearing that text read in synagogue and temple and looking at the situation of the people all around him,
the way they treated one another,
the way the poor and vulnerable were ignored in that society,
the way Samaritans and Jews and Gentiles were set against each other
the way good religious folks looked down their noses at those they didn't consider observant enough.

I can imagine Jesus seeing this and thinking, "Well, the words of the prophet don't seem to have come to pass yet." So much for God's law being written on people's hearts. So much for people not running around *saying "Know the Lord," because they'll all know me, from the least of these to the greatest.*

Regardless of what you and I believe about how Jesus came to understand himself—or to be understood as—Messiah, I have to believe that these words of Jeremiah about the new covenant shaped him. The way Jesus lived and talked—the way the early church understood and wrote about him—would be an embodiment of Jeremiah's promise that God's law—God's love—was meant to be written on the heart and it was for all people.

So Jesus told his hearers in the Sermon on the Mount that unless their righteousness exceeded that of the Scribes and Pharisees, they wouldn't experience the real joy of the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus said, "You have heard it said, but I say to you," upping the ante time and time again in that sermon. He talked about loving your enemies and not just your friends and praying for those who persecute you and not just your family. He talked about not praying and fasting and giving to the poor so that those outside of you notice and give you affirmation, but doing that because it is its own reward.

And Jesus sat down at table with all sorts of different people. He ate with tax collectors and Pharisees, simple fishermen and learned leaders of synagogues, anti-Roman zealots and people who collaborated with Pilate. He intersected with Samaritans, Jews, and Gentiles, rich and poor, and in and through it all he wasn't afraid to call people to self-giving love.

When a rich young ruler who was seeking to **deserve** his way into eternal life came to Jesus wanting to know what he needed to do to add eternal life to his bucket list as one more accomplishment, Jesus told him to give everything up and come and follow him in a life of service. What Jesus was doing was inviting him the young man into the New Covenant, based on a love that was written on his heart and not some kind of external checklist to tick off so that he could win another prize.

When Jesus had his last supper with his disciples, after he'd given them bread to eat which he called his body, he gave them what he called the cup of the new covenant in his blood. He gave them—he gave us—that meal to remind us that the way of self-giving Love is meant to be taken in—internalized—so that it enables us to go out and serve.

It's not some unrelenting external demand, but a way that becomes embodied in us as it was in Jesus. It's a new covenant way.

The new covenant says it's an inside job, not something based on external commands or the praise of those around you. The new covenant says it's not about you or me, but about what God is doing in and through us. The new covenant recognizes that we're all in this together, every single one of us the whole world wide, from the least to the greatest (and God flips that on its head). So the need to judge other people goes out the window.

Well, almost two thousand years later, looking at the way people treat each other, at least some of the time, there's still very little obvious indication that the law of love has been etched into people's hearts. It is not immediately apparent that everyone knows God from the least of them to the greatest, at least not if you judge by behavior. None of us gets it right all the time. And yet we claim that Jesus has inaugurated the new covenant.

Here's why. That new covenant is based in grace, not in judgment. The love and acceptance of God comes before we are ever able to respond to it. We grow in grace—we grow in our ability to accept ourselves, and our circumstances, and the people around us, but we never get it just right.

To go back to the tennis metaphor, there are times when everything clicks into place, and we serve with power. But then something happens and our mechanics get messed up.

We forget that it's not all about us. It's not all about what we can muster up. We rely too much on the approval of others. We get judgmental and anxious and scared. But as we grow in grace, more and more, we get back to what we were meant to be from the very beginning. We get back to what God wrote on our hearts from the very start.

It was just the other day that I ran across a piece by Emily McDowell. She writes: *Finding yourself is not really how it works. You aren't a ten dollar bill in last winter's coat pocket. You are also not lost. Your true self is right there, buried under cultural conditioning, other people's opinions, and inaccurate conclusions you drew as a kid that became your beliefs about who you are. "Finding yourself" is really about returning to yourself. An unlearning, an excavation, a remembering who you were before the world got its hands on you.*

So a few final comments:

1. Today we gave out Bibles to our kindergartners and third graders. After this service we'll be having our confirmation orientation for our eighth and ninth graders and their parents. It is our

hope that as these young people read their bibles and take them on the places they'll go and the confirmation kids explore what it means to be people who in the midst of questions and doubts live in faith, hope, and love—that more and more both the children and the confirmation students will come to understand that God's law of love really is written on their hearts.

2. One way to stay clicked in is to remain humble. So I've already blown it by bragging about beating Mark. To be humble is to be cognizant of our own ability to miss the mark so that we are more forgiving of how others miss it, too. I went to an ally training yesterday to help me to stand for and with those who are marginalized—and one of the things the trainer said was that one of the most important characteristics of an ally is humility. Not acting superior in any circumstance, recognizing that people are people, we are all capable of big oops moments, and believing that most people—as Anne Frank said even in hiding—are basically good at heart. Stay humble.

3. Another way to stay clicked in to our New Covenant identity –the law of love that is written on our hearts--is to pray and to meditate. I am a little bit embarrassed to admit that it took me more than twenty five years of ministry to pray and meditate every day. How's that for humility? But I am finding since I have started that the more time I spend in quiet contemplation with God, the more centered I am and the less reactive.

4. A final bit of wisdom, which comes from something I read this week: *You cannot move on until you accept this. You will not receive closure in every situation, but you can create it for yourself. Most of what other people do is about them, not about you. Some things just cannot be explained. Some people won't apologize because they can't. You cannot change people, no matter how much you think they need to change. People change themselves.*

We are people who believe in a new covenant, the law of God's love written on our hearts. So maybe people don't change themselves after all. Maybe it's God who changes us, because God is the one who writes love on our hearts. In Jesus' name. Amen.