Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Fifth Sunday in Lent

March 18, 20018

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WRITTEN UPON OUR HEARTS Jeremiah 31:31–34

Psalm 51:1–12

John 12:20-33

I have chosen a text for today’s sermon. It is from the 31st chapter of Jeremiah, the 33rd and 34th verses:

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 upon 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.”

What would a life look like if God’s new covenant and its instructions were written upon the heart? I am reminded of the story of Ruby Nell Bridges, who, at the young age of six was the first black child to integrate the William Frantz Public School in New Orleans. The day was November 14, 1960.

Little Ruby had passed a test to attend the once all-white school, and she recalls:

The morning of November 14, federal marshals drove my mother and me the five blocks to William Frantz. In the car one of the men explained that when we arrived at the school two marshals would walk in front of us and two behind. So we’d be protected on both sides.

In the car, on the way, Ruby’s mother said to her: “If you’re afraid, say your prayers. You can pray to God anytime, anywhere. He will always hear you.” Recalls Ruby, “That was how I started praying on the way to school. The things people yelled at me didn’t seem to touch me. Prayer was my protection.”

The family suffered terribly. Ruby’s father lost his job. White vigilantes stalked the Bridges’ home. Even Ruby’s grandparents in Mississippi were evicted from their home because of Ruby’s bold witness in New Orleans. Angry, hate-filled crowds greeted Ruby each day she walked into the school. First, her encouraging mother accompanied her, but then her mother could not be with her because of her own work. So Ruby walked alone. One day she had to walk past a black doll in a coffin.

Ruby was blessed to have a wonderful teacher, a white woman by the name of Mrs. Henry. Because the white children stayed away from school as a protest against integration, for a long time Ruby enjoyed a one-to-one relationship with Mrs. Henry.

Ruby recalls one particular day:

“One morning when I got to our classroom, Mrs. Henry said

she’d been surprised to see me talk to the mob. ‘I saw your lips

moving,’ she said, ‘but I couldn’t make out what you were

saying to those people.’

‘I wasn’t talking to them,’ I told her. ‘I was praying for them.’

Usually I prayed in the car on the way to school, but that day

I’d forgotten until I was in the crowd. Please be with me, I’d

asked God, and be with those people too. Forgive them

because they don’t know what they’re doing.’

‘Ruby Nell, you are truly someone special,’ Mrs. Henry

whispered, giving me an even bigger hug than usual. She had

this look on her face like my mother would get when I’d done

something to make her proud.”

Would that we all could be as faithful as Ruby Nell Bridges. Ruby had God’s instructions written upon her heart. God was in her every action, her every word. The new covenant Jeremiah announced was embedded in her life and still is to this day.

In the 51st Psalm, the Psalmist declared:

*You desire truth in the inward being;*

*therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.*

*Create in me a clean heart, O God,*

*and put a new and right spirit within me.* (verses 6, 10)

Ruby demonstrated the kind of naïve simplicity that only a child can have. Richard Rohr in *Falling Upward* says that in the second half of our lives we can return to that kind of simplicity, but only after we have faced and integrated into our lives the necessary suffering that comes simply because we are human and frail and mortal. Perhaps our lives represent a journey back towards the simplicity Ruby Bridges demonstrated. Notice that at first her mother had to remind her of what to do. But her mother disappeared, and Ruby was left to do the right and true thing on her own. The law of God’s love was written upon her heart. We pray that what was true for Ruby can be true for us as well.

Back to Jeremiah and the new covenant. Jeremiah announced the new covenant to the people of Israel when they were still in exile in the city of Babylon in the 6th century BCE. The new covenant was indeed fulfilled in Jewish history when the people returned to Jerusalem following their exile. We Christians have often made the mistake of identifying the new covenant as the new covenant in Christ. But that is an offense to Jewish identity and history. Jews believe that the new covenant was fulfilled when their Babylonian exile came to an end.

This past week, I have been connecting the story of Ruby Nell Bridges to the history of Israel. This is probably a bit of a stretch, but perhaps not. At the beginning of Israel’s journey as a nation, just as at the beginning of Ruby’s life, there was a naïve simplicity. The law of God was written upon the hearts of the people of Israel. In Deuteronomy 4:4f. we read: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord our God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.” Tradition holds that Moses said this to the people of Israel just before they entered the Promised Land.

Then, in the Promised Land, their history unfolded for several hundred years. There were many ups and downs in their national experience, but the most disruptive event came when the Babylonian Empire conquered Jerusalem in 586 BCE. The leading citizens, political leaders, and religious leaders were taken into exile to the city of Babylon. There they remained for over five decades.

Jeremiah’s announcement of God’s new covenant was given to the people when they were still in exile. It is as if God would return the people to the covenant first given to them at the beginning of their national history. The covenant would be written upon their hearts. But first there had to be great suffering, a falling so tragic that it threatened their very existence. But after the falling, after the exile, there was a restoration when the exiles returned to Jerusalem. There was a new beginning for the people of Israel. In John’s Gospel, Jesus puts it this way “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” There is a dying, a falling, that gives rise to newness of life.

So it is with our lives. In the beginning of our lives, we were as the people of Israel entering the Promised Land. We were as Ruby Nell Bridges. At the end of our lives, we can return to that simplicity, to that strength of faith and trust, to the law of love written on our hearts.

Jeremiah says that the law of God summarized by the Ten Commandments, at one time written upon tablets of stone, would become so embedded in the human heart that the stone tablets would no longer be necessary. Richard Rohr in his book speaks of the second half of our lives as a time when the Ten Commandments become less important than the Beatitudes spoken by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the persecuted. All these have lived through enough fallings and risings to know God and God’s ways in their hearts. The covenant of God, with its instructions to love God with all one’s heart and soul and might and one’s neighbor as oneself, has been written upon their hearts. My sisters and brothers, may it be so for us. Amen.