FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

Jeannie D. Thompson

March 17, 2024

*Heart-to-Heart* Psalm 119:9-6

 Jeremiah 31:31-34

In an amazing coincidence, I was asked to base a homily for a wedding on a verse from this very chapter of Jeremiah. Actually, what the groom and his bride sent me was the very popular paraphrase of verse 3 that says,

*Love, yesterday, today, and forever.* [*Jeremiah 31:3*]

When the groom sent me this Scripture, I was surprised that he and the bride had found a passage from *Jeremiah* for their wedding because as most of us know Jeremiah as “The Weeping Prophet.”

Jeremiah is the prophet who is best known for the way he grieved over the wickedness of his people and the impending judgment the nation’s sins had provoked. What must have been particularly frustrating for him is that his warnings went mostly unheeded. In response, Jeremiah responded to Judah’s rebellion with tears of exasperation and mourning [13:17].

Also, because of the impending judgment on Judah, God forbade Jeremiah to marry or have children. Despite this increased burden of loneliness, he was faithful and remained alone. Because of these things, Jeremiah’s message to the people was often gloomy, sad, and angry. The point of his life is that he was faithful to his calling as a prophet—be it a reluctant one.

The reason the wedding couple was able to find a verse that suited them—even a paraphrase—is because they found Jeremiah in a much better frame of mind. They found their wedding verse in the part of Jeremiah’s work when he and the people had turned a corner in their relationship with God. The wedding passage, and our passage, come from what is known as Jeremiah’s “Book of Consolation,” or “Book of Comfort.”

In this part of his work, Jeremiah and the people have made it all the way through the Babylonian exile—which was good news. What was even better news, indeed, what was the *great* news that God is now offering to renew the covenant the people had broken.

More than that, God promises to give them more than knowledge, more than the ability to take down a scroll and look a God’s holy word, even more than being able to *study* God’s word and write it on the page, God promised to inscribe God’s covenant on their hearts.

Which is to say: the renewed covenant will be a part of their being. From now on, instead of the covenant the people broke, God’s promise and love will be a part of who they are because the spirit that lives in God’s words are going to live within them, too. In fact, God describes how the covenant was supposed to have bound them together like the legal marriage of bride and groom.

From now on, God and the people will “live into” their relationship by a deeply internalized comprehension of who God is, and God’s presence will always be a part of their life.

There are at least two things to remember about what God is saying in this passage. The first is about how the ancient Israelites thought about and understood the whole idea of their “hearts.” It was, like us, the location of emotion—especially love or affection. However, the heart was also thought to be the place where intellect and ethical thought resided. Additionally, the heart was where action was central to behavior, both physically and intellectually.

The second thing to remember is that the people to whom this was said received it as a community. We hear it as something that would be unique to each of us. We hear it mostly as individuals. However, the first people who would have heard this would have heard it as an ethos the *community* would assume, as the character and identity of the community.

Today, we call it “culture.” The culture of the community would, from now on, be one where God’s word was more than a scroll, more than a proclamation. It was even going to be more than a law.

What God was saying to them was that God’s law and love was now going to be something that was nurtured in the everyday values of the people. Indeed, from now on, this is how they would be known as a people. From now on they would cultivate God’s love through their relationship and commitment to God and each other. It would be the “glue” that held them together, and that which held them in God’s embrace.

In the portion of the psalm we sang this morning, this kind of deeper knowledge is assumed. Additionally, the psalmist declares the human response to God’s presence and desire for us to live lives of honesty and righteousness which is to “meditate” on God’s instructions. When the psalmist sings:

*13With my lips I declare all the ordinances of your mouth.*

*14I delight in the way of your decrees as much as in all riches.*

*15I will meditate on your precepts, and fix my eyes on your ways.*

*16I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word.*

What the psalmist is saying is that she is describing a people at worship, a people who are invited to look upon their connection to God and one another as one in which they find joy and well-being. What is also important to notice is that the *Torah*, God’s laws, are firmly embedded in worship. It, too, is “their joy,” to coin a phrase.

Joy, well-being, and comfort—this is what is proclaimed in these passages. What we especially heard in Jeremiah was God’s pledge of love that has come after the faithlessness of the people. How surprising and wonderful is God’s promise of that which has been tried in the crucible of human living—even in face of broken promises and disloyalty and dishonesty. Our good news is that God’s love still found the strength and the desire to declare continued faithfulness. Indeed, God decrees *committed* faithfulness, compassion, caring, and goodness for all of God’s people.

This is what we, too, are offered in these passages. We are invited to have our hearts inscribed with God’s love and commitment to us. We have this commitment when we, too, commit to following God’s ways of love.

That is our good news, but it is also difficult news, as we all know, love is not always easy—not in marriage, not in any human relationship. It is even *not* easy in our relationship with God because God asks much of us. We are given a great deal, but much is asked of us in return.

To love and to be loved is to affirm a willingness to find a way to be together that is wholesome and life-giving to all parties involved. No one person or category of people are to be sacrificed, or even ignored, for the benefit of another person or people.

That is what is so troubling about the world we live in. Diana Butler Bass recently wrote of the late Walter Wink who acknowledged this in his writings even forty years ago, when he “insisted that we needed to heal the rift ‘between one-sided materialism and one-sided spiritualism.’” She wrote that “We need to understand both dimensions of the problems we face. And the solution is two-fold: a just politics and a new spiritual imagination are necessary to repair the world. “Change is possible,” Wink insisted, “but only if the spirit as well as the forms of Power are touched. And that spirit can only be spiritually discerned and spiritually encountered.”

What both Wink and Butler Bass are saying is that when we cultivate the Spirit of God’s love for us, what we are cultivating is God’s love of righteousness, truth, and compassion for one another. This has the power, says Butler Bass, of unmaking the powers at work in the world that injure, destroy, and hoard all that is good and life-giving for itself and others like it.

She concludes with, “When we see the powers for what they are, everything is transformed. The agents of this world are found to be deformed and wanting; those who confront and resist that power see a world conformed with the love of God and neighbor.”

Friends, like Jeremiah, we still need to be grieved over the wickedness we see all around us. We still need to look upon it and see it for what it is.

We still need to see and acknowledge

* the wickedness of racism that still causes violence to the body and spirit of so many;
* the effects of the genocide of an entire people for the sake of revenge and the desire to retain political power;
* the dishonesty that often disguises itself as “an alternative” fact or perspective;

and the many other ways we develop to subjugate one group of people to benefit others.

What Jeremiah and the Psalmist proscribe is that we see the world around us, that we live in the world as it is. We are to live and receive God’s love here and now, in this life, and among these issues and people. However, we are to be guided and led by the love of God—God’s own heart—that is open and drawing close to our heart. Such a heart-to-heart with God is what will show us the way forward, drawing more and more people toward God’s goodness and trustworthiness which is what may draw us all toward reconciliation and peace.

On this fifth Sunday of Lent, let us truly hear God’s word of love. Let us open our hearts so that God may write upon them the strength, goodness and love that can heal and save us. Amen.