

## To Die is the Only Way to Live     Jeremiah 31: 31-34; John 12: 20-33

In preparing for this morning's message, I found the lectionary contained two very unique portions of scripture. First of all, the passage from Jeremiah- an Old Testament prophet- stating a new and different covenant is coming, has been called the most important single teaching of Jeremiah's prophecy and many feel one of the most important in the whole Old Testament. Secondly, in the New Testament scripture from John 12, Jesus speaks in a parable of his death and verse 24- "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" is a fairly familiar one. It is felt to be the shortest of Jesus' many parables. (A parable is defined as an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.) Even though the wording is fairly familiar it has seemed to me to be a bit hard to logically get your head around, especially if you are trying to put the concept into words. However, the more I worked with it, the more precious it became.

The passage from Jeremiah, speaks of a new covenant being made by God with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. The scripture refers back to the covenant that God made with those led out of the land of Egypt- a covenant which the people broke- we talked about that a couple of weeks ago. According to Jeremiah, this new covenant is different- it is a law, not written on tablets of stone but written on their hearts. This is critical to the overall revelation of God which bridges on into the New Testament designating specifically the "Old" covenant and the "New" covenant. These words from Jeremiah in the Old Testament are one of the most often cited passages in the New Testament. It is quite certain that the words of Jesus at the Last Supper- "This cup is the new covenant in my blood" have their root in Jeremiah's prophecy. In the New Testament book of Hebrews- which contains the most references from the Old Testament- there are numerous passages that are connected to covenant language. The words found in Hebrews, Chapter 8: 8-12 and Chapter 10: 16 & 17 are direct statements from this passage from Jeremiah 31.

These words of Jeremiah were probably just after the destruction of the Temple in 587 B.C. It was a time of deep depression in the land and a word of hope was needed. The prior chapters of Jeremiah through chapter 29 are accounts of a devastating time in Israel and Judah. But in chapters 30 and 31, we find a shift- a hopeful tone and in the Jeremiah scripture for today- almost at the end of the chapter- we find the wondrous text concerning the new covenant.

It is important to understand, however, that when Jeremiah speaks of a "new" covenant, he is not suggesting that there was something wrong with the covenant made by God with Israel at Mt. Sinai. The "newness" is in the changed hearts of people rather than rules to live by inscribed on a stone tablet. God does not change, but each generation and each individual needs to renew the covenant as they make a new commitment to follow God. It is written, "I will be their God, and they shall be my people." The initiative is with God, but it calls for a response from the people.

It is important to note the individual and personal language around the new covenant, “I will write on their heart...They shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.” The old covenant, written on stone while in the wilderness, was with a nation of people- the new covenant, while still with that nation of people, has shifted to responsibility to individual members of that nation. Within each of their hearts- there is an opportunity for the individual that is new.

In these verses, some of the dimensions Jeremiah reveals to the new covenant are:

1) Transformation... “My law is on their hearts.” This is not a means of a guaranteed ticket to heaven but a means of transforming power that comes from within the heart- a total change in thinking resulting in a total change in living.

2) Fellowship with God- “All shall know me.” In the Old Testament past, intimacy with God was reserved for prophets and patriarchs, but now under a new covenant, it is an opportunity to enter into a personal relationship with God.

3) Forgiveness- “I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.” Under the new covenant, the good news is that through God’s grace all are given the opportunity to start over, to be cleansed and forgiven.

To put the new covenant of forgiveness into an example from today’s world- When using a computer, there is a painful lesson most are likely to learn, and it seems to be a wonderful example as we attempt- even in a small way- to comprehend the magnitude of God’s forgiveness. If you accidentally press the “delete” button on the computer and thus eliminate wording you wish to keep, it is impossible to retrieve that wording once the computer is turned off. When we sincerely ask God for forgiveness- God hits “delete” and our sin is gone. The new covenant in Jesus Christ overwrites the sin and it is irretrievably gone. Oh, we may come back later and check, just to see if past sins are still somewhere in the vastness of God’s memory; but no matter how we try, God has no record of that sin happening at all.

The promise of the covenant in Jeremiah- a new way of life- is seen fulfilled in the words of the Gospel of John. Our scripture from John 12 this morning is an account of a critical point in Jesus’ life. About a week prior to this time, Jesus raised Lazarus (Mary and Martha’s brother) from the dead- an action that stirred up the leadership of the day even more. They were becoming more and more determined to rid themselves of Jesus, since people were being drawn to him because of what he said and did.

Our John 12 reading begins with a request from some Greeks (Gentiles) to see Jesus. This seems almost a sign for which Jesus has been waiting, or at least an occurrence which he considers has special meaning. He begins to speak of his death, of “this hour.” Previously, we heard words that “Jesus’ hour had not yet come.” The question then comes- what makes Jesus suddenly speak of his death, that “his hour” had come? -2-

Possible answers :

1) The raising of Lazarus resulted in many people turning to Jesus and following him. That only multiplied the opposition of the Pharisees and the leaders of the Jewish community. We might conclude that “the hour” has come because of Jesus’ awareness of the increasing opposition to him. It was time for Jesus to fulfill the purpose for which he came.

2) The second possibility comes not from opposition but from the admiration of Jesus. The Greeks coming to his disciples with a request to see Jesus could be seen as a sign that Jesus’ success has reached beyond the Jews and in reality- potentially out into all the world. Jesus may see the Greek Gentiles, as the first fruits of the kingdom from the world at large. Up until this time, his life and ministry had been confined to one small country and to mostly one people. But now, the Gentiles- the non-Jews- are beginning to see, to hear and to seek him. These were the first outsiders of countless millions to follow- including you and me- who have and are being drawn to Christ.

From Jesus words, we can understand that he knows the expansion of his message beyond the Jews and unto all people, cannot continue to bear fruit until he, like a seed, dies, is buried and then grows to yield a hundredfold and more. It cannot be in the man, Jesus of Nazareth that the Gentiles come to believe but only after the Christ of the cross- the resurrected Lord who overcame death- could that message be planted in the hearts of Gentiles to whom his own disciples and missionaries like Paul would carry the Good News. They preached the crucified and resurrected Christ and it drew- and continues to draw- people to Christ.

While Jesus may have been referring to his own death by talking about the necessity of the seed dying, the next verse tells us that he is also talking about a different kind of death- different from a physical death. He says, “Those who love their lives lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” Jesus is talking about setting aside our overwhelming concern for ourselves and opening our inner selves to God’s possibilities- our life focus is on God. A dying to self is a constant struggle- we are so tempted to cling to every shred of what is known- our comfort level.

For that reason and more, it is important to hear again and again, especially during this Lenten Season, what Jesus calls for in this text. Verse 24- this tiny parable- is different from any other of Jesus’ teaching. No other parable insists that only through death can one bear fruit. We get hung up when we think of it as a physical death. It is only when the seed is surrendered totally that it holds the possibility of bringing abundance. The death of self is the surrender of the self-centered, ambitious person in order to rediscover one’s true person as the image of God.

It seems that, in addition to our personal lives, verse 24 may hold a message for us as a congregation and God's people here in Canby. Verse 24 seems to warn...that as we hold tight to the past...hold tight to what and how we have done the work of this church in the past,...unless we die to the past, we have no chance of multiplying our reliance on God in the future. Just as Christ had to die and be raised anew in order that God might truly be glorified, so must we-collectively- die to the past- set aside the past- in order to be raised anew for God's glory. Jesus remaining alive might have glorified him, but the new covenant- the covenant of the heart- would and could not have been born.

Unless- as with Jesus' example of the seed- we fall- fall on our knees to give ourselves completely to God and die to our old selves, the message of God will not be abundantly obvious through us. Dying to our old, human, earthly selves is the only way to truly live- now and for eternity. Amen

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