

A Change of Heart 10/20/2013Jeremiah 31:27-34

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals. 28 And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the LORD. 29 In those days they shall no longer say:

“The parents have eaten sour grapes,
and the children’s teeth are set on edge.”

30 But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge.

31 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 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. 33 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. 34 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.

THE TROUBLE WITH X

C.S. Lewis once wrote an essay entitled, “The Trouble with X.” X means something like fill in the blank. His point was this. We often blame our troubles on someone else, “X.” And we believe that if that if X would change, then everything would be fine.

If only my wife would come to see my point of view ...

If only my husband would be a little more considerate ...

If only my children were a little more appreciative ...

If only those Democrats/Republicans would be a bit more reasonable ...

You get the idea. But, in our passage for today Jeremiah tells the people that they can no longer blame their problems on “X.” There was a proverb in those days, “The parents have eaten sour grapes and the children’s teeth have been set

on edge.” That meant, “Our parents sinned, and we are paying the price with this captivity in Babylon.”

Jeremiah told this captive people, “That’s no longer true. A new day is coming. God is going to save you. And that means you will be responsible for your own sins.”

This is both a promise and a threat.

Their parents couldn’t change, and neither could the children. Soon enough the children would be under condemnation for their own unfaithfulness.

They needed more than just a fresh start. They needed divine intervention.

You see X can’t change. And neither can we! Christians believe that our problems are too deep to be cured by personal or political change.

Have you ever heard that phrase, “a leopard can’t change his spots?”

That phrase comes from the book of Jeremiah. The prophet, speaking for God asks rhetorically, “Can the leopards change their spots?” (Jeremiah 13:23) The answer is obvious. Of course the leopards can’t change their spots.

And then the prophet concludes, “Neither can you do good.”

A BROKEN GOVERNMENT

Why was the prophet so pessimistic about his people?

Well, their government was broken. Their government was controlled by special interests and not by a desire to serve the people. They oppressed the weak and they subjected the poor to slavery.

The country was in great danger from ancient superpowers, but very few told the truth about what was happening. The king had his own prophets who said that God was on their side and that God would give them the victory.

And these preachers for hire tried to suppress the voices of true prophets like Jeremiah. Jeremiah warned that God was going to judge the actions of his faithless people. But, no one wanted to listen.

We say in our pledge that our nation is one nation under God.

That was really true of the Israelites. They didn't have a democracy. They had a theocracy. In other words they had a nation based upon the providential care of God.

God formed their country for a special purpose. He delivered them from slavery in Egypt. He led them through the wilderness to the Promised Land.

But, the greatest gift God gave his people was the Law. On Mount Sinai God carved the commandments into stone. This was God's way of showing His people how they would be different. They had been saved from slavery to be a light to the nations, an example of what people could be if only they followed the commandments of God.

This meant two things. First, they would worship the one true God alone. And second, they would treat other people in the same manner that God had treated them. They would be a gracious people.

But, ironically, even before Moses could get down the mountain with the Ten Commandments, the people in the valley below were busy breaking all of them!

And this happened over and over and over again.

A BROKEN LIFE

It's still happening. We're still trying to turn the Ten Commandments into the ten suggestions. And when we do that, we do harm to our selves and to each other.

The Commandments of God are like the law of gravity. You can rebel against the law of gravity by jumping off a steep cliff.

But, you won't disprove the law of gravity.
You will confirm it.

In the same way when God's people rebelled against God's commandments, they brought judgment on their own lives. The Bible teaches us that all of us cling to our sinful ways with great tenacity.

The ancient words from the Book of Common Prayer put it well.

“We have done that which we ought not to have done and we have left undone that which we should have done and there is no health in us.”

The leopard can't change his spots and neither can we change our sinful ways.

The Apostle Paul expressed this in his letter to the Romans in a very personal way. He wrote,

“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” (Romans 7:15)

If the great apostle Paul felt a sense of frustration in his attempts to change his actions, what hope is there for the rest of us?

What's a God to do with people like us?

Jeremiah described the pervasiveness of sin among God's people in this way,

“ ... the sin of Judah is written with an iron pen; with a diamond point it is engraved on the tablet of their hearts ...” (Jeremiah 17:1)

God's people needed more than a new diet and some blood pressure pills. They needed something more radical. They needed a miracle. They needed a heart transplant.

And that's exactly what God gives his people.

A VISION OF A NEW DAY

Sin always has its consequences. When they broke the law and ignored God's warning, God's people brought judgment upon themselves. In this case, judgment came in the form of the Exile.

Babylon burned down the Temple and emptied the Promised Land of everyone of importance. The Promised Land became a wasteland.

Many lost faith completely.

But, ironically it was during the Exile that some of God's people came to greater faith. During this time of defeat great prophets wrote about the future in powerful ways.

Yes, the old way of life was destroyed, but God through the prophets painted a picture of a new day. In that new day the Promised Land would be restored, repopulated with humans and animals.

In that new day the leopard would change his spots. The lion would lay down with the lamb. And hearts of stone would be melted by the love of God.

The prophet wrote,

“The days are coming ... when I will make a new covenant (or a new contract or testament) with my people. I will write the law on their heart.”

When the law is written on tablets of stone (or upon the paper of the Bible), it is easy to distort or forget what God has said. God’s people did this in the past, and we are still doing that today.

We use certain parts of Scripture to prove what we already believe and conveniently forget those parts of Scripture that lay bare our sinful ways.

But, God loves us too much to leave us in our sin. And so God promises to change our hearts.

We sometimes refer to this as conversion. When we are converted we love God’s law and have an inner desire for righteousness.

That’s what the prophet meant when he wrote,

“I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.”

THE POWER OF FORGIVENESS

How is the heart transplant accomplished? It is accomplished through the power of forgiveness. In verse 34 of today’s lesson the Lord says this to his broken people, “I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.”

The heart of stone is melted by the power of Divine forgiveness. God does not cover up the sinful past. But, God does choose to let it go.

The new covenant depends wholly upon the forgiveness of God. God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

Christians see this new covenant fulfilled in the words that Jesus uses at the Last Supper. When Jesus takes the cup he says, “This cup is the new covenant (or the new testament) in my blood ...”

In Jesus we see the full extent of God's forgiveness. Body is broken and blood is shed for us. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven. On the cross we see most clearly divine love and grace in action.

God not only forgives and forgets. God sacrifices his Son on the cross for the sins of the world. And through the work of God's Spirit, our hearts can also be changed by that power of this forgiveness.

Fleming Rutledge in her book, "The Bible and the New York Times" said that two women taught her what it meant to have a new heart, to forgive as God has forgiven us.

The first woman was a white woman. She was a member of the church of Fleming's childhood church. Fleming said that she grew up in "a thoroughly segregated part of Southern Virginia."

Anyway this woman she knew in her youth had a son. And her son was killed by a car full of intoxicated joyriding African American youngsters.

Fleming said she will never forget the day when this woman said in her own mother's living room, "I don't know why I don't hate those drunken colored people."

She paused and then continued, "I guess God has given me a forgiving heart."

The second woman was a black woman. Her name was Jean Sandiford. Her son, Michael was attacked by a band of white teenagers in Howard Beach, Brooklyn.

His mother, Jean was frequently seen reading her small Bible during the trial. When asked about it years later, she admitted that the pain of her son's death had not diminished over the years.

She said, "Sometimes I just sit here and cry."

But, speaking of the three men still in prison for the attack, she said,

"At night I pray for them. I ask God to forgive them. When I talk to people about that, they say, 'You're crazy; how can you feel that way about somebody who killed your son?'"

How could these women and others like them forgive so much? Is it craziness? Or is it an instance of divine grace?

Now you may say,

“That’s fine for them, but I could never forgive such a great wrong.” And you would be right. You couldn’t forgive that much, and I couldn’t forgive that much. And maybe those women couldn’t forgive that much either.

GOD FORGIVES AND FORGETS

But, God can. And God did.

He answered his Son’s dying prayer, “Father forgive them for they don’t know what they are doing.” God even forgave those who killed his Son on the cross.

And the miracle of forgiveness, the miracle of a changed heart has been occurring ever since.

On the cross we see that with God all things are possible. Sometimes through the power of God’s Spirit even enemies are forgiven. That’s the miracle of a changed heart.

The world thinks this is crazy talk. The world thinks this is impossible.

But, God’s world is different from our world. God’s kingdom is different from our kingdom.

The apostle Paul once wrote,

“The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?”

Someone once wrote that the more things change the more they stay the same. That’s certainly true when it comes to human nature.

We see the same kind of evil and injustice today that was rampant in the ancient past. And we still have false prophets who tell us the soothing but false message that it’s not our fault.

The only difference between yesterday's evil and today's evil is this: Today's evil is ramped up on the steroids of technology. We have found better more efficient ways to exploit and kill people.

Education is not the final answer. As a friend of mine put it, "Sometimes education just creates clever devils!"

More laws are not the final answer. Sometimes laws meant to restrain bad behavior are used to gain an unfair advantage (not unlike what was going on in ancient days).

The final answer to what ails us is the presence of God. We must take His forgiveness to heart.

David Lose, a Lutheran pastor told of a family reunion. A cousin brought a greeting from a favorite uncle who had dementia. Her father wanted everyone to know this:

"Tell my family that, although I do not remember them, I still love them."

David wrote, "That has stayed with me ever since, creating. . .grief and quiet gratitude. The grief comes from childhood memories of a beloved uncle with a quick wit and deep generous wisdom who now has so few of his memories left.

Yet I can't help but feel a measure of resilient, even defiant gratitude that some emotions, like love, live even beyond our memory. And even though he may have forgotten much. . .he nevertheless remembers that we are still bound to each other in love."

David's bittersweet memories of his uncle led him to reflect on God's promise to forgive and forget.

God out of love chooses to forget. God erases his memory of the sins of his people. God says, "I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more."

This is a startling way to think about God. In this case God almost seems to limit His divinity. Is this just a figure of speech? How are we to take this amazing promise?

The thought of losing our own memory is terrifying. But, when I think about it, there are some things that would be good to forget.

What about that minor slight that I hold onto? What about the angry and hurtful things I have said to people I love? What about the terrible choices I have made in the past that haunt me even today?

It might be okay to forget those things. In fact forgetting those things really would mean a new start in life.

I wonder if exiled Israel had trouble forgetting all the things they had done wrong. In Exile their sins became crystal clear. Their pattern of idolatry and faithlessness was a bitter memory.

So, God does for Israel what Israel cannot do for herself. God forgets. God remembers their sin no more.

And that's what God does for us as well.

God forgets.
God remembers our sin no more.

The question for us is this:

If God forgets, might we also?

What was it Jesus said in the model prayer, the prayer that he wanted all his disciples to pray?

I think it was something like, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."

"Change our hearts O God. Make them ever true."

Amen.