

WPC
Rev. Ken Sunoo
October 17, 2010

Written On The Heart
Jeremiah 31:27-34

Have you ever noticed that the Old Testament is more than twice the size of the New Testament? The word “testament” is related to the word that we speak of today as “covenant.”¹ The Old Testament includes the old covenant, the covenant that was given to Moses on tablets of stone on Mt. Sinai and further elaborated in books like Deuteronomy and Leviticus.

William Willimon believes one reason that perhaps the New Testament is shorter, “not because the Old Testament has been superseded by the New Testament, but rather because the New Testament was a way not of avoiding God’s law but of fulfilling God’s law (For Christians, this “new covenant” is believed to be fulfilled in Jesus). Now, there is not the need for the long list of ethical prohibitions, a whole set of do’s and don’ts. Now the law is a matter of relationship with the living Christ. At an early date, Christians believed that Jeremiah’s prophesy about a ‘new covenant’ was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Jesus was doing within us, through us, what previously God had tried to work in us through the Law.

¹ William Willimon, Pulpit Resource, 10-17-10, p. 16.

“It’s not a matter that the Old Testament is only a book of law and the New Testament is only a book of love. Rather it was a matter that the love of God, shown forth so wondrously in God’s covenant with Israel, is now expanded, included even to those who are not in Israel, now not a matter of simple obedience, but also of relationship. The covenant is written on the heart.”²

This text from Jeremiah is an unqualified announcement of salvation, containing the only explicit Old Testament reference to the New Testament, that is, the new covenant. I want to make two reflections on this text: first, a reflection on this new covenant which is written on people’s hearts, and second, a reflection on God forgiving us and remembering our sin no more.

First, the new covenant: In Jeremiah’s vision of the future, the new covenant comes only through and beyond suffering, in this case that of the Babylonian Exile, when the people of Israel were conquered by the Babylonians and taken from their homes to live in Babylon. Thus these hopeful words come from a time of crisis and transition, when many people would have been asking if God’s covenant with the people has come to an end. Jeremiah insists that judgment is not God’s final word.

² Willimon, p. 16.

Notice that the language used in this passage is particularly intimate – it’s like a marriage between two people. God says that he was a husband to the people of Israel.

That makes sense, because a covenant is a special kind of relationship in which parties pledge themselves to one another. Old Testament covenants generally had two parts: a promissory oath and the stipulations of contents of what was promised. The fact that the law here is written, even on the heart, suggests that the basic reference is to the requirements. In that respect the covenant is like the written law. Israel will not forget what they have sworn to do.

This promise of a new covenant contains one of the most ancient and persistent formulations of the covenant vows: “I will be their God and they shall be my people” (v. 33).

The making of a covenant with God was not an individual, but a communal, act, the work of the community of faith. It was Israel’s covenant with God at Mt. Sinai that made them a people, the people of God, binding them not only to God but also to one another.

What is without precedent is the law written on the heart, the covenant at the core of one’s being. A Christian ethicist once said that “character” is who you are when nobody else is looking. Character is who you are all the

way down, deep. Or as the prophet Jeremiah might put it, character is what you have “written on the heart.”

Fred Craddock notes that in the Old Testament, “the heart is the seat of the will; consequently, the special gift here is a will with the capacity to be faithful. God thus promises to change the people from the inside out, to give them a center. This covenant will overcome the conflict between knowing or wanting one thing and doing another. In the new covenant the people will act as if they are owned by God without even reflecting upon it.”³

Which laws, then, are written on the heart? All the laws of Moses? Just the Ten Commandments? The answer is all of these things, and none of them. Just these words will suffice: “I am yours, and you are mine,” says the Lord. That is the language of love and faithfulness.

I think about this matter of the “new covenant written on the heart” in much the same way that I think about faithfulness in marriage (“I am yours, you are mine”). When you are married, the minister asks that the bride and groom promise to be faithful to one another, “till death do us part.” A rule is held up before the bride and groom, a law that they are to obey. They must respond, out loud, before God and the church, promising that they will

³ Craddock, *Preaching Through the Christian Year*, p. 441.

always be faithful to one another in keeping the vows of marriage. Some people don't take these vows seriously in the first place. Mickey Mantle was a great baseball player for the New York Yankees, but he wasn't a faithful husband. His wife Merlyn was forthright about Mickey's infidelity when she said, "He was married in a very small geographic area of his mind."⁴ But most people enter into marriage intending to keep their promises.

Now in the first days of marriage, situations may arise when the bride and groom need to be intentional about keeping the promises of fidelity. Perhaps they'll be faced with some circumstance in which they may have to remind themselves, "Now wait a minute. I'm now a married person. I've made a vow to be faithful. I can't act like I did when I was single. I made a promise in front of God and everybody. I've got to keep my vow no matter what."

But in healthy marriages, over time, the couple discovers that they are no longer *trying* to be faithful. They are no longer keeping a promise by thinking hard about being obedient. They simply are faithful. It's as if God has written a covenant upon their hearts. That which previously had to do with their brains they now do with their hearts. They are faithful, "by heart."

⁴ Jany Leavey, *The Mick*, Sports Illustrated, Oct. 11, 2010, p. 65.

Sometimes we say that we know a song “by heart.” Or we know a piece of poetry “by heart.” Willimon believes when we do this, “it’s a testimonial that some piece of music has become part of us, has burrowed deep within our souls, so deep that we don’t have to think about it, we just do it, ‘by heart.’”⁵

Well, the promises of marriage, when marriage works its magic, are just like that. We wake up one day and we realize that we are no longer trying to be faithful, or being obedient; we just *are* faithful. We are keeping the promises of marriage “by heart.” The covenant we thought we were obeying has now been graciously written upon our hearts. We don’t have to obey it anymore. It is simply who we are. “This is the sort of prophesy that one gets from a prophet who truly believes not only that God is righteous, but also that God is love. God loves us so much that God never leaves us alone, without light, without guidance. Scripture becomes one of the many means whereby God gets to us, speaks to us, shows us God’s way.”

(Willimon).

The second reflection I want to make is on the final part of this passage: God speaks through the prophet Jeremiah saying, "I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more." That’s really good news for

⁵ Willimon, p. 15.

us, because we have a tendency to mess things up. Sometimes, we end up breaking our promises. Jeremiah tells us that when that happens, we don't need to despair, because God will forgive us and no longer remember the mistakes and hurts of yesterday. It's as if God uses the delete key on a computer to erase our sin from the memory banks. We're offered another chance to make things right, so that we can forgive and not let anger and bitterness consume us.

Thomas Tewell, former pastor at 5th Ave. Presbyterian Church in New York City, tells the story of a person named Betty who he met at a conference where he was speaking. Betty was filled with anger at her husband because of an affair he carried on with his secretary. The worst part of it was how she found out. The morning after her husband was honored by the Rotary Club for outstanding service to the community, Betty was looking through her husband's desk at home to find an old photograph. Imagine her shock to find motel receipts in a file drawer from a local motel. When she confronted her husband, he confirmed the affair and rubbed salt in the wound by telling her that it had gone on for 15 years. Betty's husband was not the man that the Rotary Club nor she thought he was. Two weeks after Betty confronted him, her husband had a sudden heart attack and died! Betty was left with rage and resentment in her soul.

Betty told Tewell this story at the conference several years after the death of her husband when she challenged his point in a sermon that forgetting is often the outgrowth of true forgiveness. Betty told him she used to be a whistler. She was known for her whistling. But she hadn't whistled since she discovered her husband's affair and she would never whistle again. She asked him how to forgive someone who had died? He suggested that she write a letter to her husband and be honest with him about the hurt he had caused her. He told her to write down the unedited rage in her soul. Betty thought this was the craziest idea she'd ever heard! He thought he had offended her because she didn't show up at the conference for the next two days.

The day before the closing session, Betty came into the conference with a big stack of paper. "Betty, you look tired," Tewell said.

"You're darn right I'm tired! I haven't slept in two days. Here's the letter and I'm going to read it to you—all thirty-five pages of it!" (There's got to be an easier way to make a living than the ministry, Tewell thought to himself!)

They went to the cemetery and on a bench near her husband's grave, she read the letter out loud. The catharsis in her soul was punctuated by tears, screams and long moments of silence when she couldn't speak. When

she finished, they burned the letter and watched her rage disintegrate into ashes. He offered a prayer for Betty and she said one too asking God to help her forgive and forget. He believed God answered those prayers. Do you know why? Because the last morning of the conference, he looked out at the congregation and his eyes locked with Betty during the closing hymn, “Amazing Grace.” Betty wasn't singing, she was whistling! That's the power of forgiveness.⁶

The good news of this Old Testament text is twofold: first, the prophet Jeremiah spoke about a day when we would no longer need to read God's laws from tablets of stone but when God's way would be written on our hearts. Christians believe that day is now and that way is Christ. And second, God forgives us our iniquity, and remembers our sin no more. Therefore, we're now empowered to forgive others. Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁶ ["The Things We Dare Not Remember."](#) the Rev. Dr. Thomas Tewell, *30 Good Minutes*, Chicago Sunday Evening Club, 2003.