

Sermon text from Vicar Lauren Blatt, March 22, 2015

Jeremiah 31:31-34

*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. 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. 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. 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.*

Let us pray: May the words of my lips and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight... our strength, our rock, and our redeemer. Amen.

This morning I've decided to preach on the Old Testament reading from the prophet Jeremiah. But you see, this text doesn't make any sense unless you understand a little bit about the context in which Jeremiah is writing.

The Israelites are in exile, Jerusalem has been conquered and subsequently burned, and the temple has been destroyed. The prophet attributes this utter destruction to the Israelites inability to keep the covenant made on Mt. Sinai.

So the Israelites hear Jeremiah's assertions, but what are they to do...?

We have the same problems that the Israelites in Exile dealt with thousands of years ago. It all comes down to broken communities. We live in a world where we don't forget debts, we keep track of everything, and we keep the bottom line under close watch. We don't readily forgive. But how could we forgive in a broken, revengeful, resentful world? How do we come to a place of forgiveness and reconciliation when horrible human rights violations are committed against our neighbors every day.

The other day, I was talking to my grandmother on the phone and she was remarking about the racial tensions in America. She said, "It's like we've reverted fifty years." While I think she's right to be concerned about racial issues, I am not sure that we have reverted. I think in many ways we just made sure that we were racist under the surface, that we created systems that would persecute non-white individuals without the segregated bathrooms and drinking fountains... and now since Ferguson and other racial upheavals have occurred-- the rose colored glasses are removed and we see the racial injustices in the US (the so called land of the free).

We still have segregation (we've just made it so we don't need to look it in the eye anymore). I think that Sunday mornings are the most segregated time in the whole week... and we're okay with that. We don't have signs out front that say "Whites only" or anything like that.... so we're fine, right?

Or, how about prisons in the United States? I haven't decided if it's a new form of slavery or a big business in the US. There are nearly 2 million people being detained in this country, and about 40% of those prisons are private / for-profit organizations.

Whites make up 64% of the population in the US and only 39% of the prison population. Hispanics make up 16% of the US population and 19% of the prison population. And brace yourselves, Blacks make up only 13% of the United States population and 40% of the prison population.

Is this because blacks are innately bad and commit more crimes than their white counterparts? No, in fact, this is yet another telltale sign of "hidden" racism in the United States.

But now that I've brought this to your attention, what are you to do about it?

Like I said, it's all about broken communities. But how do we get back to God? How do we get back to a way of forgiveness?? The way back to God, says Jeremiah [in verse 34], is the way of forgiveness: the prophet write, "For I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more."

There seems to be an impossibility of forgiveness and reconciliation. I would have never thought that forgiveness and reconciliation would be possible after the horrors of apartheid in South Africa. Whites and Blacks were able to come together at the truth and reconciliation commission to speak openly about the horrors of the apartheid state, and forgive one another-- to see one another as brother and sister once again.

Bp. Desmond Tutu writes, "Forgiving is not forgetting; it's actually remembering--remembering and not using your right to hit back. It's a second chance for a new beginning. And the remembering part is particularly important. Especially if you don't want to repeat what happened." In another place Tutu writes, "Forgiving and being reconciled to our enemies or our loved ones are not about pretending that things are other than they are. It is not about patting one another on the back and turning a blind eye to the wrong. True reconciliation exposes the awfulness, the abuse, the hurt, the truth. It could even sometimes make things worse. It is a risky undertaking but in the end it is worthwhile, because in the end only an honest confrontation with reality can bring real healing. Superficial reconciliation can bring only superficial healing."

Jeremiah gives us a chance to look at brokenness, to remove the rose colored glasses, to see hurt and pain for what it is... and to be able to finally forgive.

It gives us a chance to look at human rights violation like the apartheid that's happening right now in Jerusalem. The magnitude of this injustice is outstanding. South Africans, who survived the apartheid government in South Africa, are saying that the injustices in the Holy Land are worse than that of the apartheid government... This should not happen.

Huge reconciliation efforts, like those in South Africa, are hard to imagine, but it takes one step at a time. One relationship at a time... It's not impossible... it's hard, really, really hard, but not impossible.

The Israelites can hear promise in this text. The new covenant (which God makes with the Israelites) is to be accompanied by a repopulation of the land and a rebuilding of Jerusalem and the temple in Jerusalem--Restoration of community and relationships.

God is no longer far away on the top of mountains-- sending messengers with tablets--hidden from people because death would come to those who set eyes on the Almighty. God has now come into the hearts of the people, written the covenant on their hearts, God is part of who they are.

There is still a promise for us in this text: The prophet writes, "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."

And further for us, the death of Jesus resides within us. We carry that death and resurrection around with us. It's deep in our lungs and when we breathe sighs of relief or sighs of utter disappointment, we know that our God accompanies every push and pull of the lungs.

We are forgiven & we will be reconciled to one another...God still works with the Israelites after they've blatantly disobeyed God--they couldn't manage to uphold their end of the covenant... yet God was still willing to work with them and though we will fail -- over and over again -- our God keeps coming back. Our God keeps breathing life into our dry dead bones. Our God keeps writing love on our hearts, tying up the loose ends to our broken hearts, and when brokenness and defeat sets in our God sits with us in the quiet.

Amen