

GOD'S COMPASSION FOR GOD'S PEOPLE

Jeremiah 31:31-34

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There was the old covenant, the old way of doing things. God gave commandments, describing a way of life that allows people to live in peace and harmony. They weren't rules for the sake of rules. They were rules given out of love. "Do this and you will live." "Don't kill one another. Don't steal from one another. Honor each other, especially your elderly parents." The ten commandments were not meant at all to be punitive or even restrictive. But they did prescribe a way of life that had boundaries. It was, God said, a covenant. You do your part, I'll do my part. You live according to these rules, and I will always be by your side. I will eventually get you to the promised land. It may take a while, but you won't be alone." Theoretically, there was nothing wrong with the old covenant. And the ten commandments still contain a prescription for a life that makes sense. If we were to follow them, we would find ourselves living in harmony with one another.

In the old covenant, God promised to liberate the Hebrew people from slavery, and - in return, they promised to act like liberated people. That meant two things: the Hebrew people were to worship only God, the one God and God only - and they were to treat others the way God treats them. They were to live lives that were different from those of the other nations. They were a chosen, liberated people, and their only requirement was that they were to act like it: they should be different from their idolatrous, brutal neighbors.

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, the people of Israel are reminded of this sacred obligation. “You have been liberated from slavery; that gives you a particular responsibility.” For example, the people of Israel are told, numerous times, to love the stranger. And they are reminded that they were strangers once, held captive in a foreign land. God’s law tells them to forgive debts, to take care of widows and orphans. These acts of justice are at the very heart of the covenant law.

But the people didn’t live up to their end of the bargain. They made it to the promised land, but they did so bickering and complaining all the way. And even as they began to settle in, they worshiped other gods. They oppressed their neighbors. They neglected the needs of the most vulnerable among them. They rejected the covenant again and again. God sent the prophets to try to steer them back, to get them on track, to remind them of the covenant promise.

And then the people of Israel were in exile. They found themselves, once again, strangers in a strange land. Their temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. They were trying to maintain their faith far from home. This is when the prophet Jeremiah writes, saying, “All is not lost. God has not forgotten you. There will be a time when you will return home, you will rebuild the temple, and God will give you a new chance to live in shalom, in perfect harmony.”

God is giving the people of Israel a second chance to bring about the world God intends. God has such compassion that instead of a punishment, God gives another opportunity.

It will be, Jeremiah says, a new covenant. What’s different about the old covenant and the new covenant is the word “heart”. God speaks through the prophet, saying

this, "This is the new covenant...I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts...". The old covenant was a word, spoken first to Abraham, spoken to Moses, given as law. This new covenant will be put within God's people.

It will be written upon their hearts. The new covenant is written upon our hearts.

A covenant is a sacred promise. And the church is a place that values sacred promises. This sanctuary is a place where sacred promises are spoken and witnessed and celebrated. Just three weeks ago, new members stood in front of us. I asked them if they promised to live in the ways that Jesus taught and lived. And if they promised to support this church with their gifts of time, talent and treasure. In front of all of us, in the presence of God, they said "yes." It's simple to say, but it's a bold promise. To live in the ways Jesus taught and lived!

Standing up here, before we walk back to the baptismal font, squirmy babies in their arms, parents make promises to teach their children about Jesus, to practice the faith with them, to bring them to Confirmation so that they can make the faith their own.

In this place, on this chancel, couples hold hands, look each other in the eye, and speak marriage vows to each other. In my wedding homilies, I say to them, "These vows you are speaking, they come from both your head and your heart. You are promising to behave in loving ways towards one another in times when you feel like it AND in times when you don't." They say they will love, comfort, honor each other to the end of their days. They say they will cherish each other and be faithful to each other always. They say they will do these things not just when they feel like it, but even-for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health-when they don't feel like it at all.

We don't keep our marriage vows because someone else has told us to. We don't love our children just to keep ourselves out of trouble with Child Protective Services. We certainly don't support the church for fear that we will be publicly ostracized if we don't. We keep our sacred covenant promises because they have been written on our hearts. They are not only external promises. They are promises we have made to ourselves, promises we have made because we believe it is the way God intends us to live. Promises sometimes we make without fully understanding the scope of them.

Oh, maybe sometimes people are just going through the motions. Maybe sometimes parents bring their children to the church for baptism out of some sort of superstition or just out of tradition or to keep the in-laws happy. Maybe sometimes people join the church without any real intention to enter into the commitment of discipleship in a wholehearted way. But I don't think that cynical perspective rings true most of the time. There is, in the eyes of most young parents, a depth, an understanding that they know that parenting is hard, and that life is fragile, and that we need God's help in this adventure of parenting, we need the support and prayers of the church family if we are to be any kind of adequate parents.

It's easy for couples to get caught up in the hoopla of weddings, to focus on the drama between the bridesmaids and whether or not the flowers perfectly match the mothers' dresses. But I tell you, when you have the privilege of witnessing, as I do, two people looking into each other's eyes and speaking sacred promises, just inches away from me, there is real feeling there. It is not a moment that is taken lightly. I have presided over hundreds of weddings, and not all the marriages have lasted, but in that

moment, every single person is hoping and praying for the best possible outcome, a long and loving marriage.

The law was never meant to be a punishment, it was always intended to be a gift. Just as the most loving parents, on their very best days, talk to their children about how to live, what rules to follow, how to take care of themselves so that they will leave their very best lives, God gives us covenants and commandments out of love. Previously, this law was mediated through Moses and inscribed on stone tablets by God. So as precious as this was, it was always something external to God's people. Now, through the words of Jeremiah, we see the possibility of renewal and restoration. The law will no longer remain something external, but it will be inscribed on the hearts of God's people. It will be completely internalized.

There was nothing wrong with the old law, the old covenant, except...it didn't work. It didn't take. People somehow didn't find it within themselves to follow it. Maybe because we're human, and we make mistakes, and it's so much easier to live out of our own selfish interests than to care about the well-being of others. And so God chooses another way...it's almost as if we see God choosing to try something new and different. "If my appeal to their minds didn't work, I'm going to appeal to their hearts. Maybe they will obey me, not because it makes sense to, not because I asked them to, but now because we are in a relationship together, a relationship of love.

It is God's love for us that motivates God to give us rules for living. What would our world be like if we lived according to God's commandments? If we looked after the most vulnerable among us, the widows, the orphans, the strangers and immigrants? What would our world be like if we took seriously the instructions God gave us to care

for creation in all its precious fragility? What would our world be like if we worshiped not our privilege, not our power, not our security, not our investments, not our leisure, not our pleasure, but God? Is it really that simple? Is that the answer to the world's problems? Yes and no. It's not as simple as nailing a poster of the Ten Commandments onto the wall of every public place.

The path to the life God intends for us doesn't begin in anything external, not any more. It begins in our hearts. God has written these words on our hearts. Are we listening to the wisdom of our own hearts and lives? There is nothing in these words that is punitive. It is all grace and compassion, God's desire for us to live in harmony with one another and with all creation. Let us begin now.