

Sermon: March 29, 2009

Scripture: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 51:1-12; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33

Title: "It All Points to The Cross"

Think about all the ways that God has attempted to redeem lost humanity. Beginning with the fall of man, all God has done is try to create ways in which his human creatures can reestablish their relationship with The Creator. The flood did not work. The captivity in Babylon did not work. The slavery in Egypt did not work. The giving of the Ten Commandments did not work. Being defeated in battle by the Greeks, the Romans, the Egyptians, the Assyrians did not bring the people back. What ever else could God do? At long last he decided to come personally and take charge. At great personal sacrifice God provided a way that you and I could develop a meaningful relationship with The Creator and Sustainer of Life. That way is through the Cross.

Call to Worship

Adapted from Psalm 51

Have mercy on us, O God;

According to your unfailing love;

According to your great compassion

Blot out our transgressions.

Wash away all our iniquities

And cleanse us from our sin.

Create in us pure hearts, O God

And renew a steadfast spirit within us.

Then we will teach transgressors your ways,

And sinners will turn back to you.

O Lord, open our lips,

And our mouths will declare your praise.

Hymns: # 420 God of Grace and God of Glory

#Insert Alas, And Did My Saviour Die (At the Cross)

#371 Lift High The Cross

Prayer of Confession

Eternal God, we take the Cross for granted. It has become a decoration or a piece of jewelry that we use to adorn our bodies. It has been usurped by our culture and has lost its original meaning. In our lives we shy away from hardships and difficulties especially when they have anything to do with our faith. We say with our lips that we would bear the cross, but our lives do not demonstrate this willingness. We are too comfortable and any thought of sacrificial living does not correlate with the success mentality in which we have been raised. Forgive us, Lord. And rekindle within us a sense of sacrifice that will enable us to recapture the sense of The Cross in our lives. We pray in the name of He who died on the Cross that we might live. Amen.

Call to Confession:

My friends in Christ, we are approaching the week that Christ's people have called the most holy week of the year. It is a week in which we will rejoice and shout as Jesus enters Jerusalem, and then we will weep as he is nailed upon the cross. But we know that his death is not the end. Our weeping will turn to rejoicing again on Easter morning. Let us come to our Creator now in humble confession.

Assurance of Forgiveness:

Christ died that we might live. Christ rose that we might have life anew. Our sin is behind us. New life is ahead of us. Let us rejoice in the forgiveness which God extends to us through the life, death and resurrection of Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Sermon: Freedom in the New Covenant

Jeremiah hit the nail on the head! The Old Covenant was a thing of the past. The covenant based on the written law that was inscribed on the walls of the temple and copied onto pieces of paper and stuffed into the phylacteries and worn on the forehead of the believers, and tacked on the doorposts of kosher homes. That Covenant was tried and found useless. It was broken and rendered empty.

How many times and in how many ways do we fall into the pit of attempting to replicate the Old Covenant? Just hang a copy of the Ten Commandments on the wall of the court house and we will become instantly holy. Make sure that we say a prayer before a public meeting or a sporting event, or an execution and we will insure that God is present.

The obligatory prayer becomes empty because there is no connection between it and the bitter interplay of political fighting that takes place during the public meeting; or the plummeting and slugging that takes place when the ball is hiked; or the cessation of life by order of the state.

Jeremiah saw it coming. He lived during those days when the relationship between God and God's people was being twisted and distorted, as the relationship between a husband and a wife is twisted and distorted when love gives way to personal vindictive and ego trips and self serving demands. A marriage cannot survive under those conditions and neither can the relationship between God and God's chosen people. Yes, Jeremiah saw the handwriting on the wall and he calls it for what it was.

The time is coming when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel.

It will not be like the covenant which I made with their forefathers

Because they broke my covenant, though I was like a husband to them.

Jeremiah points us toward the future. It is not a future of despair and hopelessness. The Children of Israel were caught in the moment. It was a moment of truth, of facing their own complicity in the demise of the nation. It fell squarely on the shoulders of the people who broke the Laws of Moses at every opportunity. Well, actually, they had fallen into the practice of following the letter of the law and violating the spirit of the law.

They religiously kept the Sabbath, to such a degree that they could not stop to help someone who was hurt and needed help on the Sabbath. Nor could they reach out and assist someone who was not totally kosher. And they had ways of following the law while they cheated widows out of their inheritances. Jeremiah had witnessed the way that the Covenant with God had been distorted and marginalized. It was written on their walls, but not on their hearts.

So there they sat in a foreign land. Lost, rejected, hopeless and empty. Jerusalem was in ruin. The sacred articles from the Temple were now in the possession of Nebuchadrezzar.

They were being forced to labor for a pagan king, and even to bow down to that king as if he were a god. And Jeremiah has the audacity to speak to them of hope; to remind them of the Covenant which their forefathers had with Yahweh. Except, this will be a New Covenant.

It won't be like the old Covenant. Listen to Jeremiah:

This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel... declares the Lord.

I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.

I will be their God, and they will be my people.

No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying:

Know the Lord!

Because they will all know me from the least of them to the greatest.

For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.

That is what the Lord says.

What's going to be so different about this Covenant? The dynamic of the relationship will be different. No longer written in hard fast laws, this Covenant will be written on the hearts and minds of God's people. This New Covenant will be internalized within the individual. Now, that does not mean that it will be easier. Indeed, I believe that this New Covenant will be more demanding of you and me. It will require that you and I know what God requires of us. We will have to write on our hearts: What does God require but to do justice and walk humbly with our God. That needs to become an integral part of our heart and thus our lives.

Dr. Woody Bartlett notes in his commentary on this passage that "having the law of love firmly engraved in one's heart is an adventure in freedom." He continues:

"...as many can testify, having the love of God written on one's heart is the essence of freedom. It is the freedom to act spontaneously, knowing that one's actions will reflect what fills one's heart. It is the freedom to be who one truly is, knowing that one's true character is what is most pleasing to God and therefore reflects the best that the law requires."

Isn't this what Jesus' call for moral consciousness is all about?. Is not Jeremiah's notion that God's law would be written on the hearts of human beings confirmed in Jesus' moral consciousness?

In other words, Jesus becomes the sacrament which seals this new Covenant. What is a Sacrament? An outward sign of an inward Grace! Jesus, the outward sign of God's inward Grace writ large on our hearts.

Not only that, but Jesus himself becomes the embodiment of God's willingness to show perfect love. You want to know what having God's law inscribed on your heart and mind really looks like..... look at Jesus. Even to his willingness to suffer so that the world would be reconciled to God.

Listen to Jesus' own words in John. When the Greeks (Gentiles) came to the disciples and asked to see Jesus, our Lord took the opportunity to explain what a heart in tune with God's will is like.

The hour has come for the son of Man to be glorified. I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

Now we see in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus exactly what God meant when he spoke through Jeremiah saying: I will make a new covenant. I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. And I will be their God and they shall be my people.

Easter is about the best time I know to discover the freedom of having God's law written on our hearts. This Easter, forget about the downturn in the economy. Forget about the fear of foreign attacks. Forget about the possibility that your retirement check may possibly shrink. Forget about the political infighting that we see on the TV every night.

Concentrate instead on the way that God has filled your heart with the image of Christ. Scripture alludes to this in many ways.

Paul captures the essence of how Christ (The New Covenant) is written on our hearts when he says: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation, the old has gone, the new has come.” (2 Corinthians 5:17)

And just before he was arrested, Jesus went off to a quiet place and prayed. His prayer included this request:

My prayer is not for them (my disciples) alone . I pray for Those who will believe in me through their (disciples) Message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. (John 17:20-21)

This New Covenant which Jeremiah proclaimed and Jesus Christ came to secure is not a thing to be inscribed on the walls of our buildings, or legislated into our national laws. It is a state of our mind and heart that is free to express itself the same way that Christ demonstrated it to us during his earthly life. Just think about the freedom he exhibited. That freedom is ours as well.

Concentrate on the ways that you can use the freedom of Christ’s heart in you to reach out and touch others. Loose yourself in the joy of reaching and touching and giving and sharing and supporting and caring and praying for and being with those who cross your path who are not as fortunate as you. Now that is what the New Covenant is all about and Jesus Christ is the key that makes that New Covenant come alive in your heart.

Amen.

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