

Breaking Our Hearts

Jeremiah 31:31-34 "Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, ³² not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. ³³ But this is the covenant which 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 upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, '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 I will remember their sin no more."

John 12:23-26 And Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified.

²⁴ Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵ He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ If any one serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there shall my servant be also; if any one serves me, the Father will honor him.

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As Christians, we tend to read the Old Testament through a Christian lens. We understand what we read from where we stand in time and in faith. Today's passage from Jeremiah is often heard as referring to the coming of Christ, but we need to read it in its context. Jeremiah brings a message to the Jews who are in Babylonian captivity. They had failed to obey the Ten Commandments that they had received at Mount Sinai and had fallen into idol worship. In 587 BC they were defeated by the Babylonians, the temple was destroyed, Jerusalem was sacked, and the people were carried off into exile. Even so, God announces that there is still hope.

God takes the initiative to forgive Israel's past sins and to offer a fresh beginning. The new covenant is about "newness offered by God after Judah's Babylonian exile."¹ Verse thirty-one says, "I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah." We should be hesitant, therefore, to see this as being all about the coming of Jesus. Indeed, after the Jews returned to their homeland from captivity, it appears that they were transformed, and embraced the covenant offered by God. The commandments of Mount Sinai were no longer external rules that they resisted, but were embraced as internalized, identity-giving marks of being God's people. After the captivity, idols were never again a major temptation for the Jews.

All of this is possible because God has forgiven and forgotten. The cycle of sin and punishment is broken and Israel has a fresh start in their relationship with God. Walter Brueggemann says that from this time on, Jewish faith was deeply rooted in forgiveness. The text invites Jews (and Christians as descendants of our spiritual ancestors) "to stand in grateful awe before the miracle of forgiveness, to receive it, and to take from it a new, regenerated life."² The people were transformed by this opportunity to be forgiven and to have a renewed relationship with the Lord.

As we read this text, we would do well to avoid confusing Old and New Testament with old and new covenant. For Christians to say that the "new covenant" through Jesus replaces the "old covenant" that God made with Israel causes a real problem. That would mean that God abandons or breaks promises. It would mean that God is not trustworthy. But in the eleventh chapter of Romans (11:29), Paul reminds us that God's promises are irrevocable.

The new covenant that God gives is not radically different from the previous covenant. In fact, it is essentially a renewed covenant. But it is a fresh start. There is great emphasis on God's will being common knowledge among all of the people and that will being internalized so thoroughly that it becomes second nature to the people rather than stone tablets stored away in the Ark of the Covenant. In some ways, this new covenant is about a move from law written on tablets of stone, or hung on

courthouse walls in this day and time, to commandments written on our hearts. This is a move from knowing about God to knowing God, with the closeness and intimacy that word entails in scripture. Verse 34 says in part, “They shall all **know** me” – have a close relationship, be devoted to God.

More completely, verse 34 reads, “And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.” That part of the vision embodied in the covenant is still incomplete. We are still called to know God’s will more completely and at a level so deep that it becomes our motivation. When God’s will, God’s dream for the world, becomes our dream, we will do what is just and kind, not because it satisfies some rule of law, but because it is satisfying to do. But we are not there yet. “Jeremiah’s hope is still unfulfilled. Judaism still ordains rabbis and the church still ordains ministers.”³

God’s vision is that the law won’t be external, but internal. “I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts,” is the way it is expressed in verse thirty-three. God has always invited people to keep the law in their heart (Deut. 6:5-6; Deut 30:11&14), but the emphasis seems to be greater in this renewed covenant. But, what is meant by the concept of the law being written on our hearts? We so often use the word “heart” to refer to emotion, especially romantic emotion, that we may lose its larger meaning. When we read the word “heart” in the Old Testament, we need to understand that the word “heart” doesn’t mean the center of our emotions, but the seat of our will, our decision making power. It is our disposition and our reasoning. It’s our motivation. We capture this sense of the word when we say that someone really has a heart for the homeless. Jesus spoke clearly about how the aspect of motivation surpasses sterile obedience. He said, ²¹ “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ ²² But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister,¹ you will be liable to judgment.” (Matt 5:21-22)

This vision in Jeremiah is of widespread deep relationship with God that fills us with motivation more than bare obedience. The vision isn’t accomplished, but it’s still in the process of being realized. But faithful people hear this call to covenant and live by hope, walking the path toward ever greater faithfulness.

Jesus spoke to this, saying, “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” We are like that grain of wheat, planted here to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God. But it’s hard for us to germinate and grow. We surround ourselves with a thick husk to protect ourselves. We build up a thick hide of cynicism and self-preoccupation. We encase our hearts with mistrust and fear. We turn our backs on the world around us, trying to protect ourselves from the misery and ugliness that seems to be everywhere. We seek satisfaction in turning our focus inward toward our own wants and pleasures. In all of this, we try to build a thick wall of isolation and safety.

When we hear the call of the Holy Spirit to love our neighbor as ourselves, when love tries to germinate within us, we find that our external husk has to be broken open for the life within to come out. Following Jesus is a matter of “letting go” of the thick shell that we’ve built around us. Jesus calls us to bloom where we are planted and to do so, we have to break through our beloved husk we have constructed. We have to break our hearts – break them open. The husk falls away, we let go of the viewpoint of the world, and we have new life, motivated by God’s love, and bearing fruit for Christ.

We are called to do justice.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6RlivOQOK5w&feature=related>

We are called to love kindness.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sVX-Zf4PEgg&context=C4b45377ADvjVQa1PpcFOvy-DgLTmKZuLFRSs4Y0dcpd870gudVRo=>

We are called to walk humbly on the path that Jesus walked.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zvXtNf106II&feature=related>

Psalm 51:17 NRS " . . . a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." Amen

Sisters and Brothers,
Break your hearts open.
Split apart the husk that has been built around your heart.
Let the love of God germinate within you,
So that you may have a heart for justice, kindness, compassion, forgiveness, and love.

Deut 6:5-6 NRS You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶ Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.

Deut 30:11&14 NRS Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. ¹⁴ No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

^{NRS} **Mark 8:34** He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

^{NRS} **Matthew 10:38** and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹ Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ⁴⁰ "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.

^{NRS} **Luke 17:33** Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it.

¹ John M. Bracke, *Jeremiah 30-52 and Lamentations*, WBC (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2000) p23

² Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah*(Grand Rapids, 1998) p 295

³ Allen and Williamson, *Preaching the Old Testament* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2007) p 147