

The New Covenant
Jeremiah 31:31-34
March 18, 2018 – Fifth Sunday of Lent

The writing of the prophet Jeremiah are among the longest in the entire Bible. While the prophet can, at times, get a bit wordy, the book also contains some of the richest writing in scripture; and today's text is among them.

The concept of covenant is hugely important in the Hebrew Bible. Covenant is not a word we use often in every day vocabulary, with the possible exception of sometimes referring to the celebration of marriage as a covenant. But a covenant is an agreement, a contract, I might even say a sacred promise between two parties, usually in front of witnesses; and, and a covenant is usually "sealed" with some sign. I point to the wedding ring as a sign of the marriage covenant.

About a year ago, I preached a sermon series on the covenants of the Old Testament. Remember them? There is God's covenant with Noah in which God promises never to destroy the world again by flood. There is God's covenant with Abraham in which God promises Abraham's descendants land and descendents. There is God's covenant with Moses in which God gives Moses the Ten Commandments and promises an organized and Godly society. There is God's covenant with David, in which God promises that a descendent of David will always rule the Isrealites. And, on quick observation, you will notice that all these covenants are, in one way or another, designed to further God's relationship with God's people. Indeed, the entire Bible is about God's love and God's desire to share that love, to be in relationship with all God's children.

Two weeks ago, we used John Wesley's covenant prayer as part of our communion service. Wesley wrote this prayer that his followers might come into a closer, fuller relationship with God. At that time, we passed out these bookmarks. If you didn't get on or need another, please see me or stop by the office. We have a few extras.

And this brings us to today's lesson. "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 the ancestors. This covenant I will write on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people." A new covenant, a new law, a new teaching, written on the hearts of the people.

So what's this new covenant? Jesus makes it very clear when, at his last Passover meal with his friends, he lifted a cup of wine and said, "This is my blood of the *new covenant*, poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins." So what's the new covenant? What's the new promise? That, through the supreme sacrifice of Jesus, God has forgiven our sins; and the Sacrament of Communion, the most

sacred of meals, is the sign of this most special and everlasting covenant. Please don't confuse the sign with the covenant. Communion is the sign, the seal on the covenant of forgiveness, the covenant initiated on Calvary and perpetuated on Easter Sunday with the joy of resurrection and the promise of Christ's eternal presence with each and every one of us.

God prepares the people for this covenant here in Jeremiah, when he says, "[All people shall] know me, from the least of them to the greatest; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more." What a fantastic promise. God will forgive all our wrongdoings, all our shortcomings, all our faults and failures. God will forgive our iniquity and forget all our sins. That's the promise in Jeremiah, a promise fulfilled in the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

How often have I stated that the best news in the world is the Good News of God's Amazing Love. That love is so great that God has promised unconditional love to all God's people; and unconditional love means unconditional forgiveness. It is my hope that every time you take communion, you will look at the bread and the cup and see in it the total forgiveness and unconditional love of God. I hope that every time you are handed the bread and cup, you will know that you are being given the greatest gift that anyone has ever given; and it is God, it is the risen Christ who gives that gift. During Lent we are offering communion every Sunday following our service in our prayer chapel. I hope you will take the opportunity to partake of this most special gift. I hope you will take every opportunity to receive this most special gift.

Still, there is more to this covenant than the recognition that God forgives all our sins. I can't tell you how often I have spoken with someone who is struggling, struggling with their past behavior, struggling with the "should have" demons; or, in many cases, the "should not have" demons telling us you should not have done something. My response to those people is always the same, "Do you believe that God has forgiven you for the misdeeds of your past?" And, generally the answer is "yes" or at least through some counseling and theological reflection, we can come to an answer of "yes." Then I ask, "If God has forgiven you, why can't you forgive yourself? It's in the past. It's not who you are today. Let it go."

As we recognize that in "the blood of the new covenant," God has forgiven us; we must also recognize that we are washed clean by that same blood. That same blood can wash the "should have" demons and the "should not have" demons from our mind. We are forgiven. We are made new; and we are called to accept that newness.

And, finally, there is the third obstacle of forgiveness that I attribute to the "they are bad" demons. If God forgives us, we must also recognize that God forgives others, all others; and God calls us to do likewise. And so, just as I

encounter people that live in guilt, unable to forgive themselves; I also encounter people that are literally poisoning themselves with hatred for others, people who feel that they have been wronged, and just can't seem to forgive the wrongdoers. Yes, we sometimes suffer with a myriad of negative emotion. God forgives all people, and yes, we are called to do likewise.

That being said, if individuals continue to do wrong; they should probably be avoided. If they cannot be helped, they should probably be avoided; but they should not be hated. Forgiveness is often difficult, but forgiveness is also hugely powerful. And so, we seek to forgive as we have been forgiven.

I have commented before about conversations I have had with the well known theologian, Peter Story. Peter Story was involved in the reconciliation following the end of apartheid in South Africa. In those reconciliation conferences, several peoples said, "We simply can't just forgive and forget. The atrocities were too horrible. You can't ask us to forgive and forget." Peter Story replied, "Why can't we remember, and still forgive." Friends, we can't forget the evils. If we forget the evils, we invite them to reoccur. The sign on the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. says "Lest We Forget." Yes, we must sometimes remember; but, as Christians, we are also called to forgive.

I also tell you, if you are struggling with guilt, if you are having trouble forgiving yourself or if you are having trouble forgiving someone else, I encourage you to talk to someone. Talk to a spouse or a trusted friend. Talk to your pastor. Talk to a licensed counselor. Don't let that negative emotion continue to eat at your heart.

Finally, I note that the promise of endless forgiveness is NOT a license for wrongdoing. I have known Catholic friends who have told me that they don't need to worry about sinning on Friday evening, because they can go to confession on Saturday and be absolved of their sins. Friends, it doesn't work that way. It seems to me there's a double sin there. The sin of Friday night, and the sin of assuming that penance is somehow a magic license to sin; and my friends who are Catholic priests agree with me.

So hear those words again, we are "washed clean in the blood of Jesus." I sometimes avoid the symbolism of being washed in blood. It seems gruesome, distasteful, maybe even repulsive. And still, the metaphor is hugely powerful. There is eternal truth behind the metaphor. Jesus said, "This is my blood of the new covenant," and God has promised to write that covenant on our hearts, that we will be clean; and in our cleanliness, God will forgive our iniquity and remember our sins no more.

Praise be to God for God's forgiveness, God's mercy, and God's amazing love.

Let us pray. . .

Holy Lord,

We thank you and we praise you for your covenant of forgiveness.

We thank you and we praise you for your endless love.

Lead us and guide us, that we may accept your forgiveness.

Help us to forgive others, and in that forgiveness

to extend your love to all your people.

Amen.

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