

(Jeremiah 31:31-34 NRSV)

³¹ 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. ³² 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. ³³ 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. ³⁴ 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.

(John 12:20-33 NRSV)

²⁰ Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. ²¹ They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." ²² Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus.

²³ Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴ Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵ Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

²⁷ "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say--' Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. ²⁸ Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." ²⁹ The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." ³⁰ Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. ³¹ Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. ³² And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." ³³ He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

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Love's True Heart

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Texts: Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 12:20-33

Jeremiah surveyed the political landscape of the early part of the sixth century before Jesus was born. Jeremiah surveyed the landscape, and in the end saw the signs of disaster written all over it.

Jeremiah had once had some hope. Israel's history had become a sordid affair after the glory days of David and Solomon. Religious and moral corruption had fouled the chosen people for four full centuries. And if truth be known, Israel had never made of the promised land what God perhaps had hoped.

Perhaps God should have known that the people whom the holy one brought safely through the Red Sea, only to see them become a grumbling group of ingrates, complaining, as we saw last week, about the food the water and every facet of their accommodations, perhaps God should have known the future wasn't as bright as his conversations with Abraham and Sarah had made it sound it might be. A people such as the sands of the sea and the stars of the heavens, God had told that old couple. Well, a nation did emerge, but it never really became an empire. Assyria, Babylon and Egypt were only the most notable of her more powerful neighbors, who trampled all over the Holy Land on their way to deal with more important foes.

But prophets such as Jeremiah were more concerned about her moral failings. The Biblical account of the people Israel is one long saga of disobedience and dissolution. Even king David, her most heralded ruler, had one of his most loyal generals murdered so the king could steal the man's beautiful wife. Sexual desire, poor judgement and crime, you see, have a long history in high office.

But where was I going with this? Oh yes, Jeremiah had once had hope. The story goes like this. For centuries the basic moral codes of Israel were not only neglected, they were actually lost. The ten commandments had disappeared, along with all the other rules in Deuteronomy. No one knew they even existed, it seems. But then, the scrolls were found. And king Josiah, who followed arguably the country's most corrupt king ever, Manasseh, Josiah heralded the discovery of the temple scroll and declared that the government would institute reform. It was a time of great religious and moral renewal. Josiah said that the law, Torah, including the ten commandments would become the rule and guide of Judah.

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Now Josiah had a long reign, and the reforms, it seems, remained central to his kingship. But when he died, so did the reform movement. In quick succession came horrible leaders, Jehoaz, Jehoiakim, and Jehoiachin. And even when a better king, Zedekiah, followed them, the reform was long forgotten. After awhile, Jeremiah lost hope. He saw the mighty Babylonians poised to strike, and king Zedekiah couldn't see beyond his own ego to deal with the situation.

It was here that Jeremiah not only lost hope but saw the flaw in Israel's history. God had given the law of Moses as a covenant, as a promise that if they but obeyed it, life would be good. But repeatedly Israel did not obey the covenant. And why was that? Jeremiah began to understand that it was because people kept thinking that they could do better if they didn't. The people thought they could make themselves happier by doing other things. David thought he would be happier if he killed Uriah so that he could possess Bathsheba. Almost every king in the history of God's people thought they would be happier if they lavished riches on their personal pleasure rather than caring for the poor and the sick. And Zedekiah thought he would be happier as the sovereign king of Judah rather than a vassal of Babylon. He wanted it so much that he managed to live in denial of a most obvious obliteration. So you see, things haven't changed that much. The false idols of pleasure, riches and power have been around for a long time. They have been seductive for a long time.

So Jeremiah knew that the jig was up. Nebuchadnezzar was coiled to strike, and in a real sense Israel and her promised land would never recover. Jeremiah had once had hope. Now that hope was lost. And yet, we find in this morning's passage something that sure looks like hope. Jeremiah prophesies a new covenant that God will make with the people. Jeremiah prophesies a time when the people shall all know God in their hearts, and a time when God will forgive all the iniquity that has come before.

Jeremiah stares into the jaws of defeat and nonetheless pronounces hope. Is he as mad and deluded as Zedekiah the king?

Maybe so. But maybe Jeremiah in glimpsing the great flaw in Israel's personality has also found a solution. Jeremiah imagines a time when no longer will the covenant of Moses posted on the wall as a law to obey, no longer will that be God's dealing with the people. This thinking of Jeremiah should give to those who want to hang the ten commandments in every classroom and school. Jeremiah recognizes that the laws of Moses haven't worked because they have been seen as a set of rules, rules which have disobeyed from the beginning, by people who thought they would be happier without them. If God hasn't been able to transform humanity with the rules for better than three thousand years, I trust the school board isn't up to that particular task, either.

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But Jeremiah imagines, Jeremiah hears from God, of a different kind of covenant between God and the people, a covenant within them, written upon their hearts. Jeremiah prophesies a time when the right thing, for that's what the ten commandments and all of Deuteronomy and Leviticus boil down to, the right thing, Jeremiah prophesies a time when the right thing will be such an integral part of people that it will seem to be carved into our internal organs. Jeremiah imagines a time when David would conclude that it was just not the right thing to murder Uriah and steal his wife. Instead David saw it as a rule he was breaking because he thought his pleasure was a better thing.

Now, we are talking about sea change here. There is a world of difference between saying, The things that would make me happy in life are pleasure (even if at others' expense), riches (even if it means impoverishing others), or recognition (even if it comes from falsehood), but I may get in trouble if I break the rules. It's a world of difference between thinking like that and saying, My heart tells me that true happiness is not just sensual pleasure (and especially if it injures others). My heart tells me riches are not a road to true happiness, they won't fulfill me (and they are especially problematic if I injure others to have them). And my heart tells me that power and prestige are false and ephemeral idols which will trick me into a shallow and hollow heart, (and they are especially dangerous when I endanger others in seeking them).

The difference between the law on the wall and the law written in the heart is the difference in what motivates you. In one you are motivated by opposing forces, the desire to seek pleasure, prestige and power is balanced, or supposed to be balanced, by the worry of what God may do to you if you do. In the other you are motivated by a moral code because the desire for justice and compassion and the right thing are as much a part of you as that great muscle which pumps your lifeblood.

As just a sidebar here, but an important one, I think, Jeremiah says that when this new covenant written on the heart is in place, they will no longer tell one another, "Know the Lord." Jeremiah levels a deep criticism at those who smugly tell their neighbors to get right with God, smiling while they tell you that if you don't, you will burn in the eternal fires. Jeremiah knows that if the God's law is truly written on your heart, you are more inclined to love your neighbor than to condemn your neighbor.

In any case, back to the main thread. I think we all have some idea of what it would mean to have the impulse for the right thing inscribed on our internal organs. And for many of us there is hardly a better example than Jesus. This morning's passage from John gives us a glimpse into some somewhat bitter possibilities and implications.

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The Jesus portrayed in John is perhaps the most regal and glorified of all in the four Gospels. But even Jesus in John says, "Now my soul is troubled." The Jesus in John is the most certain we have in his acceptance, even embracing of the crucifixion. But even in this most acquiescent Jesus we hear that his soul is troubled, that he is sorrowful, that he wishes at some level that it all could have ended differently. And in a better world it would have ended differently. But here it doesn't, and Jesus goes forward to the pain, regretful but resolved.

I can think of no better illustration of what it means to have the right thing written in the heart. Jesus, the light, came into the world. And the world preferred the darkness to the light. But for Jesus the light is not simply an option for the good times, to be abandoned when the going gets rough, like his disciples. For Jesus the light was not something he followed so he could get rewards and honors. Again, I think of the disciples, who saw Jesus as a route to political victory or at least to a good seat in heaven. For Jesus the light was not just a set of rules the following of which would make God happy and the failure to follow of which would make God angry. For Jesus the light was the right thing engraved in his heart and infused into his whole being.

So, when the world began to fall apart, when the authorities began to close in, when his best friends betrayed and abandoned him, in short when all those he had come to shine heaven's light on turned away from him and even sought, and succeeded in, his murder, he never questioned his course, he never complained about the bitter pill he had to swallow like the Israelites in the desert did, he never saw the apparent failure of his project, or even loss of his life as a sign he should have done something else. For Jesus knew from the beginning that it wasn't about gaining his own life, at least not in the normal sense. Better said, Jesus knew that to gain his life, really gain it, meant to do the right thing, even if it cost him his life in another sense.

Perhaps, then, this is the true hallmark of one who has the right thing written in one's heart: it's not about me, or at least it's not about the ways I ordinarily think of me. As the old hymn says, "Jesus calls us from the worship of the vain world's golden store, From each idol that would keep us, saying 'Christian, love me more.'"

Jeremiah surveyed the political landscape of the early part of the sixth century before Jesus was born. Jeremiah surveyed the landscape, and in the end saw the signs of disaster written all over it. And Jeremiah knew, deep in his soul, why that disaster was upon them. It was because they had greed and a host the world's vanities written in their heart. But even in the face of the inevitable disaster of Babylon's army, Jeremiah came to believe in a better possibility. Jeremiah came to believe that the right thing could be written in the human heart.

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Even today his words echo hope, even if they echo, also, a challenge to us. Jeremiah urges us to read God's way which is written in our heart. He urges us to uncover our true heart, love's true heart. Amen.

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