

Jeremiah 31:27-34 (NRSV)

Individual Retribution

²⁷ The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals. ²⁸ And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the LORD. ²⁹ In those days they shall no longer say:

“The parents have eaten sour grapes,
and the children’s teeth are set on edge.”

³⁰ But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge.

A New Covenant

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.

Inscribed on the Human Heart

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Medford, Massachusetts

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Text: *Jeremiah 31:27-34*

The great theologian Paul Tillich told us that humanity's great sin is that we are separated, alienated from our God. This is an unnatural state for us. We are not meant to be disconnected from our maker. In the original order of things, in the moment of our creation, we were designed with God's very imprint marked upon us. "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." says the first chapter of Genesis. In the beginning we were united with God. (Amen)

One way or another, however, we became disconnected, alienated from that imprint of God on our very being. Original sin, I suppose. But today I'm not very interested in original sin. At least I'm not very interested in how it all started if that's what original means. Was it the apple? Was it Eve's fault, or Adam's, or the serpent's? I don't think it really matters. And if original means first in the sense of novel, the first sin to happen, then I'm not interested in that either. Was it when Adam and Eve fell to temptation, or when they actually took a bite from the fruit, or when they hid from God? I don't think identifying the first sin matters very much, either.

This morning I am interested in the fact that we were created with the very imprint of God upon us, and that no matter how it got started, we live in a state of alienation from that holy stamp upon us. And far from original, our sin, our alienation is lived out day to day in very unoriginal ways. We do the same things over and over again. We covet what each other has. We justify ourselves at the expense of our neighbor. (Amen) We go to war in the name of God. We allow starvation in the midst of plenty. (Amen) We commit genocide all the while calling upon the name of a God of compassion. In our families and in our communities we are quick with anger and retribution and slow with love and forgiveness. (Amen)

We are alienated from God, and the evidence abounds in our alienation from one another. For if we are, each and every one of us, stamped with the imprint of God, we cannot be alienated from one another and be in right relationship with God. We simply cannot. (Amen)

Now that brings us to our brother, the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah was a great prophet of old. He lived at the time of the great alienation of Israel's Exile in Babylon. Jeremiah preached his heart out. He warned the people about their separation from God. He wept as their Exile approached.

But in the moment of deepest sorrow and gloom, Jeremiah predicted there would a time of return and restoration. In one sense he means a return to the homeland of Israel, which came to pass some fifty years later. But Jeremiah has an even larger restoration in mind. Jeremiah dreams of the moment when God's law will be inscribed upon their hearts. (Amen) Given what

we know from Genesis, we know that God's law, God's very being is already inscribed upon the human heart. The new covenant is really the very oldest covenant – the imprint of God on our hearts, the spirit of God in our breath. But from just after the beginning of human existence, we have been covering up that inscription so that its existence is hidden from us. The dream that Jeremiah sees is a vision of the rediscovery of our true essence, our true connection with the living God. (Amen)

But brothers and sisters, we have not yet arrived. The inscription on our hearts remains to be uncovered. Our alienation from God remains to be repaired. And I want to talk with you this morning about what holds us back, and what can free us.

There are a million things I suppose. Irene and Chris and Nathan are in divinity school studying hard to figure out all the intricacies. Corey and I had to convince a committee of people that we had some idea of at least a few thousand of the issues. But at the end of the day I think that what holds us back boils down to one thing. We are afraid. It's no accident that Jesus keeps saying over and over again, "Be not afraid." For we are afraid. Oh yes we are afraid. (Amen)

Remember Peter out in the boat in the storm. Jesus called to him, and Peter found that he could walk on water until he realized he was afraid. And in his fear he began to drown. (Amen)

Think about it for a moment. How much human sinfulness is caused by fear. We are afraid we won't have enough. We are like the rich farmer in Luke who thought he could protect himself by building ever bigger barns to store more and more excess production because he thought that would give him security and happiness. He was afraid. He was afraid of running out, and so he built big barns to accumulate his wealth, to make himself secure. Jesus says to him, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" And then Jesus goes on to remark, "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves." They are separated from God, and they are trying to cure that separation with things that are as ephemeral as their belongings. (Amen)

But ah yes, we continue to fear we won't have enough. So we store it up. We accumulate, and we don't share. In our fear we accumulate what won't help us, and we keep what will help others locked in storage. This fear of not enough is an alienating fear. (Amen)

And we have others. We have other fears, of course. We fear that we are not loved, or that we aren't even loveable. And so we build protective fences around ourselves. Do you see how the fear ratchets things up. Here I am. I'm afraid I'm not worthy, not loveable. And then someone criticizes me. Maybe they say I should have done something better. And since in some deep place I actually think I'm really a horrible person, I don't just hear, "You should have done this better." I hear, "You should have done this better, and the fact that you didn't is just one more piece of evidence that you are a worthless piece of junk." And then, depending on who we are and how we are feeling in that moment, we strike out in return, or we crawl into a corner and hurt. We are alienated from God, separated from that inscription on our hearts that tells us that we are created in the image of God. Absent that assurance of who we really are, we find ourselves striking out and being stricken, and every wound burns deep within us. (Amen)

Sometimes, actually many times, our religion gets mixed up in this mess. If I do not know that I am made with the imprint of God on my heart, if I think I am an unworthy soul, then maybe I think if I can just strive for a certain kind of perfection, maybe, just maybe, I'll become acceptable. Out of this impulse is born some of the most destructive uses of religion and the

greatest proliferation of doctrine imaginable. So, here I am, old unacceptable me. And I think to myself, "Well, here are a bunch of things that God wants me to do. If I do these, I'll earn my way into acceptability." But, of course, the whole point is that I'm insecure. So, after I've done a few of these things, I'm apt to compare how I'm doing compared to my neighbor over there. You see where this goes. It's like the guy who puffs out his chest and prays real loud that Jesus worries about. If I can show you, and myself, that I'm better than you at following the rules, then I can feel more assured that maybe God will accept me. And if I do this with the people in my own church and in my own faith, with more or less the same rules, well imagine how I do it with people who actually believe that some other set of rules will make them alright with God. Oh boy, then my insecure but self-righteous self swings into full action. I call them infidels. I say they are going to hell. And darn if it doesn't turn out that the angrier and more mean-spirited I get is directly proportional to my own fear that I've got to get it right or else. The further we are alienated from God, the more striking out at others we will do in God's name. (Amen)

*** So, brothers and sisters, if we are afraid and alienated from God, if the inscription that God has written on our hearts is covered and unreadable, how do we uncover it? How do we recover our birthright relationship to God? How do we find those words with which God breathed us into existence?

I heard Joe Palmer, who was a minister a long time ago over in the Cambridge church, tell this story once. Joe left Cambridge for the Maine coast. One day up off the coast there came a storm, a northeaster. Within minutes the seas whipped to frenzy. A young seaman got caught in the storm. His small boat foundered on rocks and broke into pieces. Fortunate for the man, he was able to grab hold of a small piece of planking. As the storm raged, he held onto the piece of wood for dear life.

Luckily for the man, a larger boat came by and saw the man in the storm hanging on to the board for dear life. It was clear that the situation was urgent. The board was small. And while it had held the man up for awhile, it was quickly becoming waterlogged. The more water the board soaked up, the heavier it became, and the less it floated the man hanging on to it. Soon the man would drown if he kept hanging onto the board.

The crew of the larger boat moved in as close as they could. The sea was still filled with swells and whitecaps. It was a frightening situation, to be sure. There wasn't time to spare. Quickly the crew of the boat threw out a lifeline to the man on the board. With expert hands the crew threw the flotation ring right next to the man. All he had to do was grab it. Well, that's almost true. All he had to do was let go of the board that was about to take him under and then grab the flotation ring. Therein lay the rub. The man had to let go of the board first. He knew that ultimately the board could not save him. He knew that the board would soon take him to his death. But he could not bring himself to let go of it so he could grab the lifeline. That split second in between terrified him and left him frozen, clinging to the board that would take him under.

Now who of us cannot identify with that man? Do we not all know who he is? Do we not know that he is us? (Amen) Brothers and sisters we are indeed that man, frozen to the broken-off pieces of a shipwreck, holding on to ways of doing things that we know will take us under, holding on for dear life to things that we know lead us to death. (Amen). We are separated from God, but we find it oh so hard to let go of the things that sink us. We find it so hard grab onto that lifeline from which we are separated, that lifeline floating right there in front

of us. We hang onto the things that obscure the inscription that God has written on our hearts. We hold onto those things that separate us from our true nature, our true nature, which is that we are made of the very ingredients of the holy, made of the very material of God. (Amen)

And now the question, brothers and sisters, is this. How are we going to get out of this fix? How are we going to let go of the shipwreck that leads to death and take hold of the lifeline that leads to life?

Well, to tell the truth, it is not easy. None of us can do it all at once. The fear that keeps us hanging onto the pieces of shipwreck have a strong hold on us. We will have to be patient with ourselves, and with each other. (Amen)

But the first step is honesty. We will have to admit to ourselves that our fears have hold of us and that they often lead us very much astray. This admission is a big deal, because if you look around the world, and if we look even within ourselves, we will see plenty of self-righteous justification of our deadly ways. (Amen) The first step for the man stranded on the board in the storm is to admit to himself that the board really won't save him. (Amen)

But then it's still hard to let go. I think that's where the church comes in. Here we can talk to each other not only about our fears but also about that inscription that is on our hearts. Here we learn, and here we remember it, over and over again. Here, through prayer and meditation we can focus and calm ourselves so that we can become less afraid of our fears. Here we can support one another and build our courage to face our fears, and then to let go of our fears and embrace our true selves and overcome our alienation from God. And here, when we fail, which we will with unflattering and maddening frequency, we can try to forgive one another, pick each other up, and try it all over again.

"So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." says the first chapter of Genesis. In the beginning we were united with God. And our project, our hope, our promise, what we are about in this place is to once again restore that connection. (Amen)