

Scripture and Sermon for Sunday, October 16, 2016

Jeremiah 31:27-34

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. 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. In those days they shall no longer say:

"The parents have eaten sour grapes,
and the children's teeth are set on edge."

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

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 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. 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. 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.

Luke 18:1-8

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" And the Lord said, "Listen to what the

unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

Let us pray...Amen.

Whether you consider yourself a casual reader of the bible, or a careful student of the bible, there are certain aspects about our God that are made more or less obvious in our Holy Scriptures. The God of the New Testament, the God that brought Jesus to the world is different from the God of the Old Testament. How different? Very different!

Today's Hebrew scripture gives us some idea of what was going on in God's mind: it seems God didn't think the old covenant was going so well. The people of Israel and Judah had consistently broken their covenant with God, even though they knew full well that their transgressions would lead to punishments that would affect their own children, and perhaps many generations to follow.

The Old Testament is filled with stories of covenants offered by God, accepted by the people, and then ultimately broken, with severe consequences and punishment for generations. Then, with a collective cry, the people would promise to be faithful again, and God would forgive them, and a new covenant would be established.

From our Jeremiah passage, I get the idea that God wants to try something new. Instead of punishing a whole nation, for generations, for transgressions, God wants to have each child of God have the law written on their hearts, from the least to the greatest, each person will have a personal relationship with God, and if there are any transgressions, God says that their iniquity and their sins will be forgiven.

Less law, less punishment, more forgiveness, and here's the kicker: personal responsibility. In our Jeremiah passage, God is contemplating making a significant change in the way God relates to God's children. From a punitive and seemingly capricious God, to a caring and forgiving God that encourages personal responsibility.

Jesus represents that change. Care to guess the chronological distance between God's contemplation of change in Jeremiah, and the coming of Jesus? About 600 years, or roughly 24 generations.

So one day, God began to muse that the whole covenant thing just wasn't working like God thought it would, and through a prophet, God declared that surely the days were coming that all would be responsible for their own sins, and that instead of laws that were written in books, God's law would be written on the hearts of the people, and should they fail, God would forgive them.

Now, who can't get behind personal responsibility? It's a hallmark of our country's value system. Many would say it is *the* outstanding characteristic that sets our political system apart from other countries.

God somehow came to the conclusion that holding a whole people accountable for a few sinners wasn't working. That punishing a whole people for hundreds of years didn't seem to add value to the covenant for God. This is yet another example from scripture that demonstrates to us in a concrete way that God can change God's mind.

And in this case, changing God's mind means that we get Jesus in the world. Jesus, who represents the forgiveness and the expectation of a personal relationship with God. It's just that it doesn't happen for 600 years!

So *part* of the good news that we receive today is that the punitive and vengeful God of the Old Testament is in the past. Another part of the good news is that Jesus, our Lord and Savior, represents a new covenant with God, one that is based on personal responsibility, personal relationship and personal action. Jesus wasn't kidding when he said that the new covenant was in his blood. His whole reason for being on earth was for the forgiveness of our sins.

Our gospel lesson from Luke tells of a parable about always praying and not losing heart. Though the story was written 75 years after Jesus was resurrected, it has immediate usefulness in this time, and in this place!

There is injustice in the world. It is the nature of the world. But in our relationship with Jesus, we know that God will hear our prayers, take into account our personal responsibility for our sins, and grant us justice. Will this happen tomorrow?

Maybe...but it took God 600 years to do something different with God's covenant...

So here's what's been on my mind all week as I've been contemplating how to preach about these texts, and in particular, how to preach about our Gospel Lesson: I find it ever so much easier to cry out when an injustice has been done to me than when an injustice is done to someone else. Don't you?

In the parable from today's reading, the widow cried out for justice to the unjust judge, and because of her persistence, because she was the squeaky wheel, she got some grease. She received justice.

And most of us can do that. Most of us can cry out for justice when we have been wronged. Overcharged for something? We can speak up. Error in our banking statement? We can speak up. Someone cuts in front of us in a long line? Some of us will speak up. Witness an injustice out in the community that doesn't involve us? Not so much.

Jesus said that even an unjust judge could be moved to grant justice with persistence and perseverance. How much more our God, who loves us, aches for our growth? How much more when we pray for our neighbors who suffer injustices at the very hands of the systems that we take for granted.

So the really good news today is that it's *never* too late to begin praying and taking heart. The very nature of our relationship and covenant with God and with Jesus means that every day we awaken, we can take personal responsibility for our sins and our failures, and ask God for forgiveness and justice, not just for ourselves, but for those who have far less resources, and hardly any voice to protest.

The challenging news is that at the end of this parable, Jesus raises the question of whether he will find faith on earth when he returns. Whether his followers can find a way to pray for justice for those who live with injustice.

That's pretty much up to us, isn't it?

Jesus *will* find faith on earth if we can begin to pray always, and not lose heart. Jesus *will* find faith on earth if we can begin to take personal responsibility for our own sins, and forget about pointing our fingers at our brothers and sisters and

complaining about *their* sins. Jesus *will* find faith on earth, because God's law is no longer just written in books, or on stone, but is written on our hearts.

So when Jesus says that God will quickly grant justice to those who pray, just what does he mean by quickly?

What if 'quickly' means 600 years? Are we any less responsible for our covenant with God? Are we any less personally responsible for our sins, and our prayers? Of course not. But we'd all have to admit it makes it harder not to lose heart if we don't see a more immediate response to our prayers, doesn't it?

Now, let's talk about this praying always stuff. Can we sit here today, in our modern clothes, with our modern sensibilities, and think that Jesus meant that we should do nothing else but pray for justice?

Of course not! Jesus did not mean that we should forget about eating and just pray, forget about paying our bills and just pray, forget about caring for our families and just pray.

Praying always is a metaphor for having a prayerful attitude always. Eating, and eating in a prayerful way, paying our bills, and doing so in a prayerful way, caring for our families in a prayerful way, recognizing injustice around us, and doing so in a prayerful way...now doesn't that make more sense? It does for me!

We can't point fingers at others in a prayerful way. We can't blame others for our circumstances and be prayerful, we can't sin prayerfully. So when we cultivate an attitude of prayerfulness in our lives, we are brought closer to our Creator God, and granted distance from the things that poison our souls. And when we cultivate an attitude of prayerfulness in our lives, we won't lose heart.

But do you know what we *do* have control over? Whether we pray always and don't lose heart. *We* control that. We don't control injustices done to us, we don't control health issues, we don't control accidents that happen, but we *can* control whether we have an attitude of prayerfulness, and whether we lose heart or not.

We will be the ones who can answer the question about whether Jesus will find faith on earth when he returns, or at least we have an answer if he returns while we're still alive! If we don't lose heart, and if we are prayerful, the answer will

always be 'yes'! Yes, he will find faith here on earth, and yes, he will find it in us! We may not be able to say that 600 years from now, but for now, it is enough to be able to say it's true for today. Thanks be to the God who changed the rules of the covenant . Amen.