

## “Written on Our Hearts”

March 21, 2021

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

In 1978 our denomination, the PC(USA), began a long discussion and debate over expanding ordination to include people who are lesbian or gay. It was only resolved in 2010, so it took a little over thirty years to get it settled. In 1978 a document was produced offering what's called “definitive guidance” on the issue. It's first of all *guidance*, so not a directive; but it was also intended to be the final word on the topic. The bottom line for the report was that homosexual behavior is incompatible with biblical teaching, therefore ordination was off limits. But in the report was a recommendation: it was recommended that individual congregations reach out to gay and lesbian people to welcome them into the life of the church and encourage them to live their lives openly and not be hidden. Most congregations were happy to accept the bottom line denying ordination, while also ignoring the recommendation to be welcoming.

But had that been different, had more congregations been welcoming and encouraging, then I suspect the issue around ordination would have disappeared. Congregation members would have formed relationships with their gay and lesbian neighbors and would have begun to realize how much their gifts are needed in the church's life and would have called them to serve as elders and deacons. The key to changing the hearts of a people is through relationships, not legislation.

That's the insight Jeremiah brings to the people of Israel in their darkest hour. Jeremiah spoke to a people on the brink of and later in the midst of exile. They have lost everything. How could that be? How could God's chosen, God's own people, be defeated? What does it tell us about God and what does it say about them? All through Jeremiah's career he tells the people and the leadership of Israel that God is fed up with them and will allow Babylon to overthrow them. They didn't want to hear it. Who would? Instead they insisted that they knew God's mind because they had the Law. And so long as they followed the Law, God was bound to defend them.

The problem was, they didn't really get the point of the Law. Torah is not meant to regulate people's lives. God doesn't enter covenant with people in order to control them. God enters covenant with them, gives them Torah, to be in relationship with them. And through that relationship to transform them. You cannot legislate compassion or love of neighbor. But it was only through exile, by losing everything, that Israel was brought to a place where God could finally write Torah on their hearts. They had to go through what Franciscan priest Richard Rohr calls “falling up.”

Falling up means going through loss and the death of our “little self,” our ego in order to progress on the spiritual path toward compassion and wholeness. Or as Jesus might put it, “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.” For the people around Jeremiah the grain of wheat was the culture they had built on the false belief that God would forever protect them regardless of how they treated one another. They had to fall. It wasn’t easy or joyful; it was a hard experience to go through, possibly the most traumatic experience in biblical history. It completely re-shaped them. But it opened the way for compassion and the love of neighbor to be written on their hearts.

That’s exactly what Jesus is talking about in this passage from John. He says, “Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” I don’t think he’s talking about physical loss of life. What he means, I think, is holding on to a way of living that is self-oriented and self-absorbed, only protecting what’s mine and what I’ve come to value, results in a life that is hollow and meaningless. If we want a life with substance, a life that’s whole and full of meaning, then we have to let the old life go. We have to learn to hate that life and reject it completely.

That is not an easy thing to do. Jeremiah’s people went through exile for sixty years. And even though Jesus is resolved to go to the cross and has no fear, those of us called to follow him often find ourselves shaking in our boots and running short on courage. Our denomination spent over thirty years bickering and sniping, sometimes saying horrible things to one another and about one another before finding a way to live with compassion. Policies could not save us, only relationships could.

So, in the end that’s what we decided to do. We acknowledged that no one is fully suited to be ordained and that everyone should be heard and known when being considered for ordination. Every ordaining body, sessions for elders and deacons and presbyteries for clergy, is to learn what’s written on every candidate’s heart, putting all other considerations aside. We’re called to do our best to live with compassion and love and no other standard.

Through Jeremiah, God says to the people, “But this is the covenant 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.” This is the relationship God invites us to enter: to have compassion and love written on our hearts. This is how we follow Jesus, how we serve him: by letting go of our hollow lives for a way of living that’s lasting and whole.

As we enter this final week of Lent, moving ever closer to the cross, we can hear the voice of Christ calling us to follow, to make his life, the compassion and love he embodies, our own and to discover the meaning we long for. Listen to his voice and let him write his love on your heart.

Amen