

COVENANT LIFE

A Sermon on Jeremiah 31:27-34 and Luke 18:1-8 October 16, 2016 by Dr. Gregory A. Goodwiller Sumner, Mississippi

Let me set the scene for this morning's Old Testament reading. Jerusalem, the holy city, was on the brink of destruction. Oh, some refused to admit that the end was really near, but it was. The Babylonian army was just too many, and too powerful. Perhaps they could *hold out* a bit longer. But sooner or later, their downfall was inevitable.

God raised up a prophet named Jeremiah in those days to *explain* to the people what was happening to them, and *why*. That was the role of prophets. They put things "in perspective." They offered meaning to situations that seemed meaningless. The prophets were often unpopular, of course, because they told the truth, and the truth could *hurt*.

We've been hearing from Jeremiah in the lectionary readings this fall. Israel's case, as Jeremiah saw it, was simple enough. They had made a *covenant* with God. Then they had *broken* that covenant. And they weren't the least bit *repentant* about it. The people *openly* worshiped other gods, and they had long since abandoned their social responsibilities – as if to "flaunt" their independence before the One who had formed them as a people, gathered them together, and promised to love and care for them always.

Over time, the Israelites had developed what some Biblical writers called a "hardened heart" — the inability to be "moved," resulting in a sense of self-sufficiency, and a lack of *reliance* on God's promises and expectations.

Jeremiah, using vivid and sometimes graphic language, described God's coming judgment in no uncertain terms. In our lesson a few weeks ago, he said it would be as though a potter realized the piece he was working on his wheel was "spoiled" beyond repair, and his only recourse was to *smash* it up, and start all over again.

Point one. Covenants – *promises* that we make to God – are *important*, and they are *serious business*. When they are made, they must be *kept*. When they are

broken, there are *inevitable, inescapable* consequences.

But Jeremiah also *loved* his home, his nation, and his people, and he refused to believe that God would abandon his chosen ones forever. And so in one of the few *hopeful* passages of the book, the prophet describes his vision of a future time, *after* the consequences, the time of an entirely *new* covenant, one that will be based on *forgiveness*, rather than *righteousness*, a time when the “law” will be “written on the *hearts*” of believers, and in which we won’t even have to *learn* about God. We will just *know*.

Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel calls this 31st chapter of Jeremiah the “climax” of his prophecy, and he says that Jeremiah proclaims “the promise of a new covenant which will mean not only complete forgiveness of sin, but also a complete transformation of Israel. In time to come, God will give Israel ‘one heart and one way’ and make with them ‘an everlasting covenant,’ which will never be violated.”

And for Christian Biblical scholar James Philip Hyatt, this passage is “one of the mountain peaks of the Old Testament [which] came to have great importance in the New Testament. It is quoted,” Hyatt notes, “in . . . Hebrews . . . It lies behind the words [of Jesus] at the Last Supper . . . It is referred to in other New Testament passages, and is responsible for the distinction which was eventually made between ‘The Old Testament’ and ‘The New Testament.’ ”

Jeremiah’s vision is certainly moving and profound. But while we Christians profess that Jesus of Nazareth is in fact the promised messiah, and that *we* are now living in the *era* of the fulfillment of the great prophecies of the Hebrew Bible, we are *kidding* ourselves if we say that “The Christian era” — that is, the world as it exists here and now — is the world the prophet described in those beautiful words.

And so, in the Christian community, *we* too are still awaiting a time of “future fulfillment,” when God’s promises of both the new and the old covenants will be “complete.”

Which means . . . that we are still living in the time of “not yet,” the time when we still don’t know “fully,” when we must still be “taught.” And that “tension” between the world as it *should be* and the world as we *experience* here and now, is the basis for how we Presbyterians are “ordered” as a Church – how we *worship*, how we are *governed*, our emphasis on education, and social outreach, and all the rest of what we *do* as the Church of Jesus Christ.

I love Jesus' parable in our Gospel text. It goes by a number of names. My personal favorite is "the parable of the nagging widow." In the story, Jesus says that the widow gets her way with the unbelieving judge only because she has "worn him out." I can't help but wonder if maybe that's how she became a widow in the first place!

Jesus' point is that even an "unrighteous" judge will *eventually* "give in" to someone who *continually* petitions him. So then the believer has no reason whatsoever to doubt that God, who is not only *righteous*, but also *loving*, and *caring*, will *surely* help those who continually seek counsel and aid.

My point is that Jesus knew his followers were going to *need* counsel and aid. Paul's 2nd Letter to Timothy proclaims that "all scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work."

The prophet Jeremiah envisioned a day when "learning" about righteousness would no longer be necessary, when we would be able to "obey" God perfectly, because of a miraculous change of our nature. But until that day comes, we exist in the not yet, and we *live* by Covenants.

"Covenant life" is the life of "not-yet-finished products." It is the life of being *together, in process*. In fact, *making* a covenant — *entering* the community of faith, *getting* married, being *ordained* (set apart by the Church for a particular "function" of leadership) taking *any* vow — is *always* just the first step on a new journey, and a journey in which training, reproof, correction, and continual prayer will *all* be necessary.

In the marriage ceremony in the old Presbyterian Book of Common Worship there is a line that I dearly love, and that I am convinced is the most important of the entire service. It says that Christ, through his disciples, has "instructed those who enter into this relation to cherish a mutual esteem and love; to *bear with each other's* infirmities and weaknesses; to comfort each other in sickness, trouble, and sorrow."

The longer I am in ministry, the more I am convinced that there is a profound affirmation in those words. In the first place, they are not what most people want to *happen* in their marriages. We don't want to *bear with each other's* infirmities and weaknesses. Heavens! We want to *correct* each other's infirmities and weaknesses!

But in the end, our partners' Christian journey is between them and *God*, not us, and it is a process that is never *completed* in this life anyway. And so when we marry, we agree to *accept* each other's imperfections. We *acknowledge* that we are *not* perfect, and will never be (in this life). And we *recognize* that marriage exists precisely *because* we have needs that are *beyond* ourselves, and we promise to "bear with" each other.

And then too, we marry, most of us, hoping that together we might *avoid* sickness, trouble, and sorrow. But we are *called*, in our covenant life together, to *comfort* each other *in* sickness, trouble, and sorrow, not *avoid* them. Sickness, trouble, and sorrow are *realities* of this human existence, and the *joy* of covenant life is in not having to *face* life's adversities, life's lessons, life's "reproofs" *alone*.

In some future time, all will be perfect and complete. But while we are here, we have *covenant life* – the life of learning, and sometimes of *struggling* to make progress, sometimes even of *floundering*.

The Good News is, *in* that life, God has not left us *alone*. First, *God* is with us. But we *know* of God's presence not just in private, individual ways. We *know* of God's presence through the various covenant *relationships* in which God has *placed* us. We are together – by God's grace – in families. We have partners, with whom we make special life covenants.

And then, we *also* have the communion and fellowship of the faith community – this group of individuals we call our "church family." And a family it is – with all of the qualities that make family life both *rewarding*, and also incredibly *challenging*, and at times *frustrating* beyond belief.

I mean, let's be honest. The reality is that church people are not always as kind or as understanding as they should be. They don't always use good discretion in keeping confidences, and let's face it. Sometimes we are downright judgmental.

That is certainly a *shame*. Because it is clear that the church *exists* to be a place of "mutual care and concern," where, as in a good marriage, individuals can "bear with each other's infirmities and weaknesses;" and "comfort each other in sickness, trouble, and sorrow." That is what covenant life is all about. And that is the "atmosphere" that every congregation should strive to create.

But let's not be naive. As long as churches are filled with *people*, the Church

will continue to be an imperfect institution – a covenant community of individuals *seeking* their way, learning (but learning from their *mistakes*, as well as their *successes*) and constantly needing to rely on God's grace and forgiveness to get us back on track, and moving forward again.

And that is alright. It is why we are *here . . .* together, in covenant. Life in covenant relationships is fulfilling. And it is good. It is the life God has created and established for us in this time of “not yet.” It is the life God blesses and sustains.

We have work to do as a church family in the days ahead, because we are all still living in the time of the not yet, together in covenant, by the grace of God. May God be with us as we seek to be His faithful covenant partners.

And to God be the glory. Amen.