

Written on Our Hearts

Jeremiah 31:31-34

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Prayer: *O God, your love is over all your children, your judgment lifts up and frees rather than destroys what is valuable in us. Restore us to a covenant relationship in which we can find the fullness of life you intend, and offer it to the world that needs it...*

In his book, *In Peace and in Freedom*, Bernard Lafayette says: "(Martin Luther) King once told me that laws could regulate people's behavior but not necessarily their hearts. When people's thinking changes, it affects how they view other issues of injustice. Once they have a change of heart, they may not accept other unjust conditions. It's not the people in the movement that's important; it's the movement in the people that counts...changing a law will make a difference only if people have changed inside."¹

*...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.*²

Jeremiah is reflecting on the covenant that Israel has kept with God. There is this gap between what the covenant could have been, and what it is. Jeremiah is interpreting an older tradition in Deuteronomy³ where it is taught that learning God's law fully, would allow it to be so instinctual, so ingrained in human life, that "teaching" as we know it, would become unnecessary, it would become as close as the air in our lungs, like a fish unaware of the water they swim in. It would be the culture of the people; Jeremiah describes it as being as close as the words already forming in your mouth. "the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart..." Jeremiah is arguing in favor of less complexity, and more heart.

But the heart can be a tricky standard to apply. How do we do that?

Many of you reading this will understand that many faith communities, including congregational churches are organized democratically. Meaning that things like the time in between settled Pastors, decisions about the building and other big changes can take a long time to allow for a group to form and to study the issue. But that doesn't mean that the final decisions are the right ones, it means that the final decision are the ones that have consensus. That doesn't make it God's will, only our will, that we ask God's blessing on, our best effort at a faithful answer.

Several of you have recommended the movie *The Social Dilemma* to me. It illustrates that in our age with Artificial Intelligence in social media actively working to polarize us if we use it, one of the most important things we can do is to pay attention to minority/dissenting voices, even when we cannot take their side. I urge you to read commentary by people whose politics are

¹ *In Peace and Freedom*, Bernard Lafayette Jr. and Kathryn Lee Johnson 2013 University of Kentucky pp. 144

² Jeremiah 31:33

³ Deut 30:14

different than yours but whom you respect. Appellate Courts have had the practice of recording a majority decision and a dissenting opinion on the cases they hear. The dissenting opinion is an art form, perhaps made most famous in our age by Ruth Bader Ginsburg, where she would lay out how she thinks the majority has missed the major issue. And history tends to prove right many dissenting voices. Many, many issues can have more than one legitimate point of view. Paying attention to them is a path to wisdom.

The pandemic has revealed to us that the most vulnerable people, minority voices, in our country have higher rates of illness, and higher rates of death; from Covid19 -- and from other causes. And paying attention to these voices will be the key to overcoming the pandemic. It's the beginning of wisdom, to listen.

Many dissenting, minority voices history has not sided with, but we can still hear them. Jeremiah's voice for example.

I was surprised to learn in a lecture in graduate school that there was strong opposition to the printing press when it was invented. I think I thought that everyone would have welcomed a way out of their illiteracy – but that is my bias, from our era, looking backwards. (My children have reminded me of the amazing moment when you go from riding in a car as a child looking at signs and then suddenly you are able to see words and messages.) The argument against the printing press has been all but lost to history, but there was at the time a vocal group, particularly among the clergy, that was concerned that if we began printing scripture people would stop memorizing scripture. ...and if you reflect on that, you might consider, how right they were. Until the printing press, it was common to have the entire book of Psalms and large chunks of the New Testament committed to memory. You could quote it while you were going about your other work, whether in the field, or in the kitchen, whether in the dark of night or during stormy weather, these words were in you so deep, you could not forget them. It was very important in their age to be able to recite prayers as someone was dying, heading into war, or giving birth. Not moments when you may be able to reach for a book and read; if the scripture were in your heart you could take it with you into your messiest moments, as a guide, comfort, and inspiration. We have better access to better translations today, but they live outside of us in books, or on the screen, on Bible apps, not necessarily in our hearts.

We have traded this habit of memorization for better accuracy, more translations, but fewer of us can call it up in an emergency. Scripture is interpreted differently depending on the age and time. Not because of what is written on the page, but because it is interpreted by the beating hearts the thoughtful minds of God's people in the moment. Faith is designed by God to be portable.

So what is written on your heart?

Many more people in this pandemic are struggling with anxiety and depression. Mental health has become a serious current issue that we need to begin to engage in some creative new ways. It is normal to struggle with social distancing over a solid year. How is your inner voice treating you? Is she reciting scripture to inspire you? Is he singing a hymn to accompany your daily tasks with joy?

Jeremiah is seeking to break this down for us and to make it easier. The past has certainly held disappointments, but do not let yourself be consumed by regrets, or the rules you make for yourself to follow to make amends. God does not require any of this -- money, knowledge, sacrifice -- those are things that impress other humans.

God sees you the other way around; from God's perspective, you are okay, right where you are. You are loved as you are. Your heart, is where God will begin. With God's love written on your heart, you will know God – of course – and that is what God has been wanting all along. A way to start, a place to start -- with you.

So write God's love upon your heart. Listen to people on both sides of the cacophony of issues around us. God's love will lead you, and it is a better entry point than rules, histories, or arguments.

One of the challenges that churches face today is inviting younger generations into them. Right or wrong, young people are not growing up in a culture that has a lot of Christian resonance. Churches are confusing to those outside of us. When they do stumble upon a church it is hard for them to understand what is happening in there, why things are done as they are, did they just offend someone accidentally? It is far easier to stay away and not offend anyone than to risk joining.

I have a lot of sympathy for this. It feels to me that the further you get into church life, it is like a tunnel with more and more to learn, to know, to do. We emphasize lifelong learning, because there is so much material. It is a journey that some of us have been on for a long time.

When it is written upon your heart, it can always be new, and relevant; faith is a joy, a point of connection with an amazing group of people, and a way into the complexities of life with a clear moral compass. With Jeremiah's encouragement, we carry the love of God in our heart, giving light for the journey, and wisdom for the future.

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