

## **Jeremiah 31:31-34**

## **Knowing God by Heart**

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First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama

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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.

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When God writes the Law on our hearts, will it be, I wonder, with a trembling finger? All those shattered tablets and broken promises—does God ever feel afraid to hope? Afraid to extend grace, extend God’s own heart toward us, when always before we’ve snapped it like a pencil?

“Now my heart is troubled,” Jesus says in our Gospel reading. And whose heart wouldn’t be? Whose heart wouldn’t be troubled after having given your whole self for the world? After teaching with wisdom, healing with compassion, offering forgiveness, challenging injustice—whose heart wouldn’t be troubled when it

becomes so clear that everyone who's been watching you has missed the point of who you are, and still doesn't understand the God who sent you?

And yet, Jesus, frustrated and down-hearted though he is, refuses to give up on us.

“What should I say--"Father, save me from this hour"? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.”

Jeremiah, too, has shaken his fist at a hardhearted world that refused to listen. Yet still, he won't give up, and neither will the God who sent him. “I will make a new covenant with them,” he declares on God's behalf. “A new covenant that is written, not on stone, but on their hearts.”

A covenant written on our hearts.

*By heart:* that's what we call it when we trace something so deeply in our memory that it can never be erased. My grandmother once knew innumerable poems by heart, and anything could trigger one of those poems. When I was small, and would keep tagging after her, asking question after question while she was trying to get her chores done, she would suddenly stop where she was, and begin: “I have

a little shadow that goes in and out with me, and what can be the use of it is more than I can see.” That wasn’t the end: trust me, that poem has lots of verses.

I’ve learned from nursing home visits that the things we learn by heart stay with us, even when other memory goes. People sunk so deeply into dementia that they can’t carry on a simple conversation will perk up and join in after hearing the first few words of the Lord’s Prayer.

Do you remember those childhood experiments in invisible ink? Lemon juice traced with a wet finger on paper, then left to dry? Hold the blank paper over a flame, and slowly, like magic, words begin to appear in a wavery brown, like the sepia of old family photos.

The things that we know by heart don’t leave us. Not even on our worst day. The things that are written on our hearts are indelible.

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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.”

This passage is from the part of Jeremiah called “The Book of Consolation.” By the time we get to this passage, all the way in chapter 31, we *need* some consoling. As Jeremiah is speaking, everything in Judah is falling apart. Temple and priesthood and kingdom are all trampled underfoot by the Babylonians, and the leaders have been taken off into captivity. What’s worse, as far as Jeremiah is concerned, those leaders have no one to blame but themselves.

“Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness?” Jeremiah berates Jehoiakim, one of those leaders. “But *your* eyes and heart are only on your dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood, and for practicing oppression and violence....Therefore, with the burial of a donkey [you] shall be buried—dragged off and thrown out beyond the gates of Jerusalem.”

Angry words from God, and there are plenty more where they came from. But as all the harsh prophecies come true, we finally come to this passage:

“...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.”

What has changed? Nothing. At least, nothing has changed within the people, except that they've been brought so low. They are no longer in a position to use or trample others. Now, *they* are being trampled. It seems that God simply can't bear their continued pain, and can't bear to stay separated.

And as God reaches out, there is the hope that *this* time, things can be different.

This time, God says, “I will write my law *on their hearts*.”

Words on a stone tablet are external, easily misunderstood or twisted or forgotten. But what's written on our hearts becomes part of us, part of our deepest, truest being.

Today, like Jesus, my heart is troubled. Isn't yours? Troubled by the murders of eight people, including six young Asian women, in Atlanta. Troubled that the murders were perpetrated by a fellow-Christian who reportedly saw the women as the cause of his pornography addiction, and thought that killing them would

remove the temptation. As though they were objects, not people. Objects, first, for his sexual gratification; then objects to be removed to solve his own fixation.

That's what can happen when we misconstrue the letter of the law, and miss the heart of God.

Because God never turns us into objects to be destroyed. God never stops seeing us as people. Moreover, God never stops loving us as God's children.

Last week during the Horizons bible study, Camille Bryson remembered how, when she was working in the ICU, she sometimes had to care for patients who had committed terrible crimes. That could be a struggle. What she started doing was trying to imagine that person at the age of five, wondering what might have happened to them then, when they were so vulnerable. This helped her to see them as people, not just criminals, and to care for them with compassion.

What if we learned to do that, as well? What if the shooter in Atlanta had stopped to imagine the women he was about to kill not as objects to fetishize, but as children—vulnerable and beloved? Could he have still gunned them down?

And what if he had known that the God whom he thought he was honoring with these acts of violence saw those women in that same way—as beloved children—and saw him that way, as well?

I learned recently that when you delete something on your computer, it doesn't actually go away. Instead, that space in your computer's memory is simply made available for other things to be encoded over it. Only when that happens—when that particular space is taken up with something new—only then does the old actually disappear.

We cry out to God for a clean heart, a fresh start; but for the old to disappear, it has to be replaced with something new.

“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.”

When God writes the law on our hearts, it isn't like pencil, easily erased, or stone etchings, easily shattered. Instead, it sinks into us the way lemon juice sinks into the fibers of a sheet of paper. It becomes part of us, indelible. And any time life turns up the heat, the words and actions that are needed emerge naturally out of

who we are—out of who God has made us to be—the same way invisible ink rises up off the page when exposed to a flame.

God is tired of being an empty word or a stony thought. God wants to be known by heart, the same way God knows us. To be part of us, indelible.

As we approach the end of this season of Lent, these weeks that lead toward the Cross, we each have our own destructive patterns we need to be rid of, and our own particular ways of breaking God's heart. And so, God offers us new hearts. Hearts on which God's law has been written with God's own finger.

These new hearts will beat strong and sure with the knowledge of God— every pulse sending faith and hope and love coursing through our bodies, so that we can look upon each other with the same tenderness that God does, and with each new breath and each new movement, we will live God's praise.



