

I Will Write it on their Hearts

Hespeler, 21 March 2021 © Scott McAndless – Lent 5

Jeremiah 31:31-34, Psalm 119:9-16, Hebrews 5:5-10, John 12:20-33

I don't know exactly how old I was, but I know that I was pretty young. And I remember sitting in church one day and having a thought. My thought went like this. I looked up at the minister where he stood in a pulpit that, from where I was sitting anyways, seemed to tower over me.

He was wearing a long black robe that made him look very severe and very serious. And he was going on preaching in his sonorous voice. I have no idea what he was saying. In fact, I don't think I generally had any idea what he ever said which is maybe one of the problems that led to my thought. But I remember distinctly the thought that I had. I thought, it must be so nice for him to be able to know that he is going to heaven.

Now, why did I think that? As I said, it had nothing to do with what he was saying. As far as I know, he always preached a gospel of grace and certainly never proclaimed that only people like him would get into heaven.

Living with Expectations

No, it had more to do with what I inferred from the actions and words of others. It was just that I knew that I was living in a world where a lot of people had expectations of me. There were expectations of how I would behave, that I would "be good." There were expectations about how I would perform in school and in other areas of my life. And I was keenly aware of how I fell short of those expectations.

And, when I did fall short, I lived in fear of punishment, not necessarily physical punishment mind you, but people certainly did have ways of letting me know when they were displeased with me. And, when that was the life that I was living, it really wasn't a big step to take all of those assumptions I had about how the world worked and map them directly onto God. I just assumed that God would be inclined to punish me more than anything else.

Now, I don't say any of this in order to imply that my parents or others around me somehow did me wrong. They were, of course, greatly concerned for me. They wanted me to do well in life, to not be afraid of some hard work, to do the right thing and, well, to be a good person. The expectations that they put upon me as well as the rules and boundaries they set, were really about trying to make sure that I was safe, happy and well-rounded.

Whose Fault?

It is not necessarily their fault that I experienced some of that as judgment of me that made me feel bad about myself. It was not their intention, though, to a certain extent, it may have been inevitable. There seems to be some tendency in humanity, when we are presented



with reasonable boundaries and helpful rules and regulations that are meant to guide us to live well, to quickly jump to the conclusion that we are being judged, found wanting and threatened with punishment.

Sometimes this conclusion is driven by the people who are trying to guide us and who are afraid and that they may not succeed and so they go overboard with threats and criticism, and we end up jumping to our conclusion. Sometimes, it comes from ourselves and our own lack of self-confidence and our fear that we're not going to measure up. In both cases the root problem is actually fear.

Torah and God's People

The history of God's relationship with the people of Israel kind of worked like that. When God chose the people of Israel to be God's chosen people and a vessel for good in the world, God wanted those people to do well, to build each other up and remain faithful. And so, we are told, God gave them something called the Torah to live by.

The word *Torah* is commonly translated into English as *law*. But the Hebrew word actually means something closer to *guidance* or *teaching*. You see, the point of it was not that people just follow certain regulations and abide by certain limitations. The point of it was that they would live well and in communion with one another. The point of the Torah had never been mere obedience, it was supposed to be about helping people live their best lives.

But, like I say, what is given as guidance and teaching with the best of intentions can often be received by us as obligation, restriction and judgment. If it happens with children growing up and with Christians who hear the gospel of grace, you can be sure that it sometimes happened with the ancient people of Israel. I'm not saying that this was a flaw in the Jewish faith. In ancient times and still today, Jews who take the Torah seriously can experience it as a joyful thing, as something that helps them hold onto their identity and makes them be who they were created to be. Experiencing such guidance as a burden is not a Jewish problem, it is a human problem.

Jeremiah's Prophecy

And it is in that sense that we need to understand the passage that we read this morning from the Prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah is speaking for God when he says, **"This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my *Torah* within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people."**

The traditional Christian interpretation of this passage is that Jeremiah is looking forward to the coming of Jesus in it – saying that Jesus will set us free from living under the obligation of the law. And it is not as if that interpretation is entirely wrong, there is a very real sense in which Jesus brought a fulfillment of this passage, but it is also true that Jeremiah understood that people didn't need to wait for the messiah to come in order to live out this promise.

תּוֹרָה

Hebrew word: Torah
Meaning: Direction, Guidance
or Instruction

It had always been the desire of God that people live the Torah from their hearts and not simply by following written down rules. And if anyone opened their heart to God, God would be willing to give them the kind of Torah that could be written on their hearts instead of just being chiseled onto tablets of stone. Yes, Jesus did come to set us free from living under the tyranny of rules and regulations. But that had always been the intention of Torah.

What Jesus has done

What then can we say that Jesus added to make that all much more possible? In our reading this morning from the Gospel of John, Jesus says this: **“Now is the judgement of this world.”** I think this says something important about why Jesus came. He says that his coming is connected to judgment, but it’s not actually about the judgment that we usually assume it is. It is not the judgement of individuals.

Yes, of course, people are responsible for their own actions, but the bigger problem is and always has been the system by which this world operates. That is the system that I struggled with when I was younger because it told me that I was not good enough. That is the system that often arbitrarily condemns people to live lives dominated by guilt and shame. It is the system that continually fails to help us be the best people we can be. And so Jesus declares, **“Now the ruler of this world will be driven out.”** That world system, with all of its flaws, will be dismantled.

And then Jesus goes on to explain exactly how his coming has made that possible. **“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”** For what is the crucifixion of Jesus but the most potent demonstration of God’s love that there has ever been in the history of the world.

God’s Steadfast Lovingkindness

That love has always been there. If you read the Old Testament with understanding, you realize that such deep abiding love has been behind God’s every action from the beginning. It was out of love that God created us in the first place. Had God wanted obedient drones, we could have been programmed to follow every command but, no, God valued love for us more than compliance from us and so we were created as free beings.

The Old Testament covenant, the basis of the relationship of the people of Israel with their God, was founded on what they called *hesed*, often translated as the steadfast lovingkindness of God and it was out of that love that God gave them the Torah, again not to control them but to guide them into the best way of living. Love is the underlying premise to every action of God throughout the Bible. It is we who mess all of that up and turn it into a story that is concerned only with judgment and obedience – a story that is the very opposite of love.

So, the love and the grace have always been the key to the story, the problem is just that we have a hard time receiving that story and, just like I did when I was a kid, we turn it into a story about buying your way into God’s good graces by your good works.

חסד

Hebrew word: *Hesed*

Meaning: Goodness, Kindness

Jesus upon the Cross

So what does Jesus do to change all of that? Jesus is just purest and most unrefined image of the love of God that we have ever seen. That image is made most perfect in Jesus loving his people enough that he was willing to be crucified for them. That is what Jesus means when he says, **“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”**

The image of Jesus upon the cross is an image that is so clear, so compelling, that it becomes this powerful magnet drawing people towards God. They come, not because of a sense of obligation or fear or judgment, rather they come as a response to such pure love. And that is how Jesus, lifted up on the cross, becomes a fulfillment of everything that Jeremiah was looking forward to, even as Jesus continues to be part of the very same story of God’s steadfast lovingkindness.

People still live under the tyranny of the law

Jesus on the cross is a story that is, of course, almost two thousand years old. But, two thousand years later, there are still people who are living under the tyranny of the law, under the tyranny of the fear of not measuring up and thus not being worthy of love or acceptance. As was true of me as a young boy growing up in the church, many of those people are Christians. The cause of that problem is our failure to truly understand the meaning of Jesus upon the cross. The problem is not that the image wasn’t clear, nothing could have been clearer, the problem is in our own hearts.

As long as we carry around in our own hearts the idea that we are not good enough and that we do not measure up, that true message of love will not penetrate. Jeremiah was absolutely right we need a new heart, and we need a Torah inscribed upon our hearts.

A Spiritual Exercise

So here is our spiritual exercise for today. You have brought a heart with you today, or at least I hope you have made one. This is got to be one of the easiest crafts we’ve done during this season of Lent after all. So, even if you haven’t brought a heart, I encourage you to make one and do as I instruct you after we are done. Here’s what I want you to do. Take your heart and take a pen or pencil, and I want you to write the Torah on your heart.

How do we do that? Do we write down some particular command or rule, maybe even the golden rule of doing unto others as you would have them do unto you? Is that it, do we need the perfect rule? No, here is what I want you to write on your heart – are you ready? Write this: *“I am loved, accepted and approved by God just as I am.”*

That is it. *“I am loved, accepted and approved by God just as I am.”* That is the message that Jesus has sought to put through to your heart from the cross. And if you can accept the truth of that statement, that will be the first step towards you having a Torah in your life that you follow with all your heart spurred by joy and not by obligation.

Heavenly Father, write your Torah on our hearts with your steadfast lovingkindness. Amen.