

Unloading the Burden

Jeremiah 31: 31-34

March 17, 2024

In the very first chapter of Jeremiah, the prophet gets directions from God as to his mission. First of all he is reluctant to be a prophet but God says he will put the words he needs to use. Then he says that Jeremiah is to pluck up and pull down, to destroy and overthrow and then to build and plant. There are six verbs here, four of which are negative and then two of positive nature: build and plant. So for the first 29 chapters Jeremiah is doing all he can to destroy and overthrow. The temple has been destroyed, some of the people have been led into exile in Babylon, and Jerusalem is in ruins, thanks to the king of Babylon. It's like a patriot watching a flag burn or a scholar watching a library burn.

Jeremiah blames this catastrophe on the people's behavior. They have not followed the law of God and it brings devastation. It is not an easy thing to tell people, which is why he didn't want the job in the first place. But then in chapters 30 and 31 we get the book of comfort. And in the section I read from Jeremiah we read that God has figured out the old covenant isn't working. This reward and punishment action isn't working. The Ten Commandments, the Sinai covenant was broken both literally and figuratively.

So God says to them I will write my covenant on your heart. It will be internal rather than external. You won't need to carry the tablets around with you anymore. You won't need your cell phone or your tablet. You won't need to tape it to your bathroom mirror nor on your refrigerator. It will be in your heart. It will be for the least of these and the greatest of these. There will be no more dividing people into classes. Everyone from the garbage collectors in

Memphis to the King of England. Everyone will have access to it because it's on the inside. And the best line of all is the final one. I will remember their sins no more. The focus of this covenant is forgiveness, generated by God. God will have amnesia when it comes to your sin. Living a new life in God begins with forgiveness.

It's what's said In Psalm 51, we read: Create in me a clean heart and put a right spirit within me. That word 'right' is about righteousness. The law that will be written on our hearts is forgiveness which through the spirit of righteousness. Righteousness is close to justice.

God will have amnesia about our sins. It's like you have an overdue library book and you are afraid to bring it in because the fine is huge but the library in an effort to get books back says, all fines are forgiven. Oh, whew, I can now take it in and give the book back and I'm free to get that awful feeling out of my heart of guilt. The librarians have amnesia and they won't even hold a grudge against you ever. You can go to the grocery store now and not worry about running into the librarian, feeling shame and fear.

We used to in this nation have gun amnesia. Police departments, in an effort to get guns off the street tell owners they could bring in guns they stole or ended up with and not get prosecuted for it. I'm sure those days are over but that's the way it works. Aren't you glad that there is spousal amnesia? Sometimes rather than holding something against your spouse for something you did wrong, your spouse will forgive you and forget the mess you made.

This is a new covenant based upon forgiveness and living without shame or guilt. The story of the prodigal son is the best example of this in Jesus teachings. The son takes all of his inheritance, goes and spends it on lustful living and spends it all. He ends up in a pig pen and

then remembers how the servants back home are living better than him and he heads back home and his father greets him and forgives him and throws a party. There is no retributive justice in this story, it's all restorative. The son is welcomed back regardless of what he did. You don't need a reminder about forgiveness because it's written on your heart. That son would never forget that. If you've ever experienced forgiveness whether it's an overdue library book or an argument with a family member, you have partied too much, you don't forget those moments. It's a feeling not a concept. We don't live up to goals and expectations, we live into them. I will forgive them and remember their sin no more.

I've been volunteering at the Polk County attorney's restorative justice initiatives. An offender is now required to meet with two community members to review their crime and discuss how it came about and the ramifications for it. So I've met with probably twenty offenders so far in 30-45 minute conversation. They have to tell two of us what occurred and how things are going for them. Most crimes are like theft, OWI, rowdy behavior. There are consequences for their actions. Mostly it's paying fines, being on probation and blowing through a device in order to start your car. But in this meeting there is no judging going on, it's a time to reflect on their crime, why it occurred and what effect it has on their lives. How are they getting along with their probation? Most admit they were stupid, didn't think well. But at the end of the conversation, I've been telling them this line I learned from reading Bryon Stephenson's book Just Faith. "We are all better than the worst thing we've ever done." It feels grace filled. Isn't it like hearing I will remember your sin no more.

The reactions I've gotten are like, Wow I like that line. I'll remember that line. Wow thanks for that. Sometimes you can see their shoulders kind of droop. It's like God telling the Israelites after all the exile and all the judgment, God says to them I will remember your sin no more. You can take that burden off your shoulder. Create in me a clean heart O God and renew a right spirit within me. It's like taking a deep breath and letting it out. The shame begins to drip away. The burden of the sin is released. Renewing the righteous spirit is the trick to this. Take with you that grace and pass it on. Create in me clean heart and renew a right spirit within me and let me share it. How do we project that "righteous" spirit?

A few weeks ago I was leading a bible study and we were discussing ways to reflect God's love and justice and mercy and grace. A woman who hadn't spoken much shared at the end of the class her example of a renewed spirit. When her daughter was in first grade, she would drop her off at school, give her a kiss and tell her to have nice day. After the third day her daughter came home telling about a boy in her class, who the minute she stepped out of the car, was in her face teasing her and bullying her.

So the next day when she took her child to school, she parked the car walked with the daughter and her daughter pointed out the boy who was bullying her. The mother walked over to him reached down and put her hand up to his ear and told him she wanted to whisper something to him. So she said to him my daughter doesn't like you teasing her and she's becoming afraid to come to school. Then she pulled back and gave the boy a hug. Then she said I want to meet you again at this time and give you another hug. So the next day she would

whisper in his ear and give him a hug. This continued until the boy stopped teasing her daughter. And he never did it again.

It's amazing how much time and energy is spent by our public school teachers trying to stop bullying. There's lectures and time away from school. And it's even worse now with social media. This one mother stopped it with hugs. Then the woman told the group that 8 years later when her daughter was 12 or 13, she attended a school program and that little first grade boy who was now a middle school student came up to her and said I remember when you gave me hugs in first grade. And I want to thank you for that. Amazing.

You know what else is amazing about this story is that the woman is African American and she was incarcerated when she told this story. Women at the Well has a ministry at the Fresh start program located in a building just west of Broadlawn Hospital for women reentering the world after prison. Three things in this day and age can disqualify that woman, her gender, her race and her time in prison, yet she solved the bullying problem with some hugs. God says that this covenant is for the greatest and the least of these. I asked the woman what made her do what she did? She replied, "Well I've been hugged and loved in my life in spite of the mistakes I've made." Sounds like she's been forgiven also and someone did not hold a grudge.

Michael Foucault was a French thinker who believed if you mixed erudite knowledge (book learning) with disqualified knowledge (street or experiential learning) transformation would occur. His example was to put an illiterate El Salvadorian farmer in the same room with a member of the World Bank. Both would have knowledge that could benefit the other. If educators were to listen to the mother who fixed the bully, both could benefit.

I will forgive your iniquities and remember your sin no more. What a burden to have lifted and what a way to live in freedom. Create in me a clean heart O God and renew a righteous spirit within me. I will remember your sin no more. We are all better than the worst thing we've ever done.