

---

The Heart of Lent  
Martin Grove United Church  
March 18, 2018  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Jeremiah 31:31-34 and John 12:20-33

“Covenant” is such an interesting word. From Jeremiah we just read, “God will make a new covenant with God’s people. God will put God’s law on the hearts of the people, so they will no longer be able to disobey God”. These are familiar words, and yet somehow, they feel very stark. We need to remember that large swaths of the Old Testament involve a narrative cycle that repeats many times over. The cycle always starts because the people have some type of problem - in other words, the people are complaining. Then, God delivers them from that problem. The people are grateful to God and worship God for awhile. And then as time progresses, after life gets back to normal, the people go back to ignoring God. Then, some crisis hits the people, and the cycle starts all over again. That cycle of crisis, salvation, worship, and then ignoring God happens over and over in the Old Testament. In Jewish theology, the new crisis is actually caused by the people forgetting God so it’s a nice tight endless loop that exhibits some interesting aspects of the human condition.

And so the part of the story in Jeremiah we read this morning is simply an extension to that story. God gets tired of “God’s people” continuously letting God down, and decides that the problem is that a written law can be broken, but that if the law was placed on the people’s hearts, then they would be unable to disappoint God in the future. The story from Jeremiah in it’s basic form is simple, and perhaps understandable. The people - the ones who wrote this story - realize that they are on a seemingly never-ending cycle of disappointing God - which leads to their next tragedy - and they are struggling to find a way to break that cycle.

I want to share one other piece of history that hopefully helps us find meaning in the story for us today. Today, we know that human thoughts are located in our brains. But the ancient Greeks had a different idea. The Greeks, apparently, placed the seat of thought in our hearts. Actually, the Greeks located quite a few human functions in our

---

hearts - including intelligence, memory, and emotions. I suppose that's why we ourselves use strange language sometimes. For example, if I had memorized this entire sermon, I would say that I know it "off by heart", when obviously I would mean that the sermon was "in my brain". I share that observation with you because we should understand that Jeremiah - who wrote long after the ancient Greeks came up with their ideas - was not telling us to avoid thinking. The idea of placing laws in our hearts does NOT mean putting the law away from our thoughts, but rather putting those laws exactly into our thoughts. Writing the laws on our hearts meant having those laws embedded in our brains - so deeply embedded that we didn't need to think about them.

So much for history. Today, I would suggest that when we think about God's laws, we face a different type of tension. I believe that the tension for us is not about whether God's laws are in words or our hearts, I would suggest that the tension is between whether God's laws are in our heads, or in our hands. The real question isn't where laws are stored in the human body. The real question is whether or not the laws stored in our heads are actually put into practice with our hands. Or in modern terms, "Do we live out God's laws, or do we just talk a good game".

Muslim scholar Safiyah Fosua put it this way, "The tension between head knowledge and righteous living is resolved by changing *where* the law is written - from stone tablet to the human heart". Fosua sees the tension today between head knowledge and righteous living. Dan Dick says, "How often do we forget the basics? How regularly do we ignore compassion, mercy, sacrifice, and justice in favour of personal comfort, security, enjoyment, and entitlement?" How often do we follow along without reflecting on our lives, and continue our own "endless cycles" that lead us nowhere except around and around.

I'm reminded of a movie (of course!). It's a really cool movie from 1927. Black and white. A silent movie. In German. It's the movie "Metropolis". The movie depicts the life of a city - the metropolis - which has two classes of people. On the one hand, we have an upper class, the thinkers and designers. And on the other hand, we have the workers. It's an industrialized vision of the blue collar/white collar split, but the split is described in the movie as head versus hands. The hands people are trapped in

---

exhausting, tedious work, servicing the machines that were invented by previous generations of the head people. The hands people have lives that are dull and boring, and physically demanding. They are hopeless. The head people have their own problem, which is that without actual work, they suffer from a lack of purpose. They are pointless. Both groups need each other, but it is the prophet - Maria - who recognizes the need for a mediator - a saviour - who can cut through the barrier between the hands/head, and reunite all people into just “people” that are all equally valued and equally important. Their society has stagnated into an endless cycle of servicing the same machines, and that cycle needs to be broken.

Maria preaches to the hands people that a mediator is coming. And he arrives, in the form of Freder, the only son of the leader of the head people. Freder is not really a head person. He is not really a hand person either. He is a heart person. And after a lot of action, drama, and a modest amount of romance, Freder is able to unite the leader of the hand people with the leader of the head people. And the big finale to this 2.5 hour movie (remember, this is a silent movie) are the words “The mediator between head and hands must be the heart”.

The desire to live by our hearts is clearly an old and important idea. It made sense to Jeremiah. It made sense to Maria and Freder. But what does it mean for us today? Not only that, but the need to break out of endless cycles is also an old and important desire. The people with Jeremiah could not break out of their cycle of disobedience to God, and the people of Metropolis could not break out of their cycle of meaningless living. What does that mean for us today?

What endless cycles do we live with that are not helping? The story from John gives one example. In John’s story, some Greek people come to Jesus - and it’s a big deal that they are Greek. They are not allowed to speak to Jesus directly, but have to go through the disciples, Philip and Andrew for screening. Philip and Andrew do not trust these people because they are foreigners, not “one of them”. But when Jesus gets wind of it he says there is nothing to worry about. “I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” Jesus was saying that his ministry was NOT about staying small and safe, and living in the past.

---

His ministry was about growth - growth through change and transformation to embrace a future that is not exactly like the past. Outsiders are not people we should fear. Outsiders are people that we should welcome with open hearts. Outsiders are an opportunity! And yet, 2000 years later, we continue to distrust people who we claim are different from us. From immigrants, to refugees, to the now very tired image of the “Evil Russians”, we are trapped in an endless cycle of not trusting people who are not like us. When will we ever learn. When will we break that endless cycle. And when will we break the cycle of wanting to keep our past instead of embracing our future?

As many of you know, Marjorie and I spent the previous week in South East England. We saw lots of interesting things. But I could not help but be struck at how imbalanced their society is. For example, I spoke with a number of people who felt that Brexit was only getting traction because of fear of immigration, and everything that represents. After centuries of the British Empire stealing from the people of the whole world, England now wants to close it's door to the people of the world. Jesus's message of welcome to outsiders is still a radical message. Can we even imagine breaking out of that cycle?

What other endless cycles are we stuck in? How about the cycle of being very negative, which leads to disappointment, which leads to being judgemental, which leads to being more negative? What about the cycle of being very judgemental, which leads to an unwillingness to forgive others, which leads to resentment, which leads to being more judgemental? I'm sure each of us can think of endless cycles in our own lives that are not helping us.

Well, this is lent. And lent is a time to reflect on our lives, recognize whatever endless cycle we are trapped in, and take the opportunity to break free from those cycles. And we stop those cycles by recognizing what it is that God has written on our hearts. And in fact, by recognizing that God has written on our hearts at all.

We are children of God. We are loved by God. We are loved. We break our cycles as we recognize that we are capable of better. That we deserve better. But we need to accept God's love. God's love is stronger than many trivial problems you are facing. God's love is stronger than whatever drama you are now living through. God's

---

love is stronger than the cycle that you long to break. God's love is enough. You are enough.

Do you long to be happier? Stop focusing on the negative and focus on the blessing you have all around you.

Do you want to have a better life? Start each day by writing down 5 things you are truly grateful for.

Do you want to be less impacted by negative people? Stop hanging around negative people.

God says that you are worth it. I say that you are worth it. The only challenge left is for you yourself to believe that you are worth it.

This is lent. And the heart of lent is transformation. Lent is way better than Christmas!! Lent blows the doors off Christmas. At Christmas you might get new socks. But during lent, you might find new life.

Embrace life. Embrace love. Embrace God.

*Amen.*