

October 16, 2022
Pentecost 19, Proper 24 C
All Saints', Littleton, NH
The Rev. Curtis Metzger

Jeremiah 31: 27-34

Psalm 119: 97-104

Timothy 3: 14-4:5

Luke 18:1-8

This morning we have an interesting trinity of readings: Jeremiah speaking about a new covenant that God will make with the people – writing the law on their hearts; Paul's final comments to Timothy about staying true to the faith he was raised in; and the slightly enigmatic parable that Jesus told to get at the importance of the being rooted in prayer with the story of the unjust judge and the persistent widow.

But before I begin, and since I've been preaching from Jeremiah for several weeks now, I thought we'd have pop quiz – so get out a sheet of paper from your notebooks and a number 2 pencil; and yes, this will count toward your final mark! Wait, no paper and pencil, OK, we'll have an oral quiz. Ok, so here goes....hands up please.

1. About when did Jeremiah live? (around 587 B.C.)
2. What were the names of the 2 Jewish/Hebrew kingdoms that were overthrown? (Judah/Israel)
3. What was the name of the king of Babylon that overthrew them? (Nebuchadnezzar)
4. The conquest of the 2 kingdoms were a shock to the people because according to their faith, their covenant with God promised them something as long as they were faithful. What did God promise them? (The Promised Land!)
5. About how long were the people of Israel in captivity in Babylon? (70 years)
6. What was the name of Nebuchadnezzar's horse? (Aha, trick question – wasn't in the Bible!)

Aha!, so you are becoming Bible scholars! Well, this morning there is something very interesting that Jeremiah said. He reminds them in days past people would say, "The parents ate sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." This was a saying by the way....what do you think it meant? It meant, essentially, because of the covenant with the whole people, that if one generation sinned, then the children would be liable because it was an indivisible covenant with the whole people of God---a very strongly tribal and communitarian notion of covenant. But Jeremiah said that a new covenant was going to change the focus to be very personal---it would be written on their hearts and they would no longer need to just follow rules, it would be internalized. Now, to be sure, this wasn't a totally foreign concept because there were rules and laws that individuals were supposed to keep, but this new covenant would put special emphasis on the wakeful consciousness of each person.

For centuries now Christian scholars have suggested that Jeremiah was foretelling of the coming Jesus and the new covenant brought with him. Much was made of this 'new covenant' language and in fact 5 of these verses read this morning were quoted in the Letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament. Some scholars called Jeremiah the first gospel of Jesus! It is interesting to see the connection, but if we are being honest to the text, Jeremiah really was talking about the restoration of Israel, but in a new way. But, that being said, the ideas of Jeremiah's new covenant really do shed light on the new and different kind of relationship that God's people, and us by extension, are to have with God. It is much more intimate and relational.

The lesson from second Timothy seems to yank us in the opposite direction with all the talk of remaining faithful to the faith as he received it (which was from his mother Eunice and grandmother Lois) and studying the received scriptures, meaning of course what we call the Old Testament. One lesson seems to be saying break through to the new, but the other seems to be saying hold on to the old. The important thing to remember here is that they are not mutually exclusive. In fact, I think, the wisdom is holding both in a creative tension and learning from both.

In a sense, the gospel parable might perhaps show us a way. It is an odd parable and slightly enigmatic. Jesus uses this parable, as the scripture says, to remind them "about their need to pray always and not to lose heart." And then he tells this parable about the unjust judge and the

persistent widow. It must be remembered that a primary role of a judge in Jewish culture was to protect the oppressed, the widows and orphans; but clearly this judge did not care too much about his role and function – he didn't fear God and didn't respect people. To him a widow came and persisted with her case until he relented to just to get rid of her. The Greek here is literally: 'lest she come and beat me'!

It must be noted that we should not make the unjust judge to be a stand-in for God, for he goes on to juxtapose the two and say how much more God will hear and respond to prayer. So how is this about the need to pray always? Well, to me praying always is about constantly reminding yourself that we are created in a grace-filled world and God's grace and goodness are bursting out all over if we only have eyes to see. Part of this is practicing 'seeing'!...which is hard to do....and particularly practicing with a positive focus or vision.

I want to quote some from, *The Universal Christ*, by Richard Rohr. It really is a wonderfully refreshing book and in reading it I have new insight into how good the 'good news' of the gospel is. In one part Rohr talks about the difficulty of hanging on to this vision that is nurtured in prayer:

Brain studies have shown that we may be hardwired to focus on problems at the expense of a positive vision. The human brain wraps around fear and problems like Velcro. We dwell on bad experiences long after the fact, and spend vast amounts of energy anticipating what might go wrong in the future; conversely, positivity and gratitude and simple happiness slide away like cheese on hot Teflon. [anyone relate?!] Studiesshow that we must consciously hold on to a positive thought or feeling for a minimum of fifteen seconds before it leaves any imprint in the neurons. The whole dynamic, in fact, is called the Velcro/Teflon theory of the mind. We are more attracted to the problem than to the solution, you might say." (Rohr, pp. 63-64)

And there we have it.....this is why Paul was encouraging Timothy to hold on to the faith, continue to study scripture, and be persistent.....much like the widow in Jesus' parable. We are hard wired in the other direction and it's a struggle! And what if this was, in fact, the original sin?....to be focused not on things divine, but things broken and without relationship to the divine.

Rohr talks about this when he writes:

The True and essential work of all religion is to help us recognize and recover the divine image in everything [based on the idea that God created everything, as Rohr says – ‘the first incarnation’]. It is to mirror things correctly, deeply and fully until all things know who they are. A mirror by its nature reflects impartially, equally, effortlessly, spontaneously, and endlessly. It does not produce the image, nor does it filter the image according to its perception or preferences. Authentic mirroring can only call forth what is already there.

But we can enlarge this idea of mirroring to give us another way to understand our key themes in this book. For example, there is a divine mirror that might be called the very “Mind of Christ.” The Christ mirror fully knows and loves us from all eternity, and reflects that image back to us. I cannot logically prove this to you, but I do know that people who live inside of this resonance are both happy and healthy. Those who do not resonate and reciprocate with things around them only grow in loneliness and alienation, and invariably tend toward violence in some form, if only toward themselves.

Do you then also see that lovely significance of John’s statement “It is not because you do not know the truth that I write to you, but because you know it already” (1 John 1: 21)? He is talking about an implanted knowing in each of us – an inner mirror, if you will. Today, many would just call it “consciousness,” and poets and musicians might call it the “soul.” The prophet Jeremiah would call it “the Law written in your heart” (31:33), while Christians would call it the “indwelling Holy Spirit.” For me, these terms are largely interchangeable, approaching the same theme from different background and expectations. (p. 59-60)

So, I want to affirm that there is this new covenant written in our hearts, but it is tough to remember. That is where the persistence, the study of scripture, the use of holy imagination trains our mind to the divine. And for me the study of scripture is not just about learning history and law and bible verses, but much more in the monastic practice of lectio divina, it is prayerful reading of scripture that tunes the mind to the divine.

Oh, it would be so nice if it were just making a logical or even faithful assent to these truths and ‘call it good’, but these lessons remind us of the work of constantly training the mind to wake up to the divine in all the world around us, or, as Rohr would have it – to wake up to the Christ filled world we live in. And for him, as the scriptures and some of our forebearers understood, Christ was more than Jesus. Christ was the image

of the divine in Jesus who was very much in this world (the point of the incarnation) and showed us what it means to be fully awake and Spirit-filled! That, my friends, is what some would call 'salvation'!

And the goodness of being awakened in prayer is not just so that we can feel holy. If you truly practice being awake in Christ, 'putting on the mind of Christ', as Paul often said, compels you to be just as persistent as that widow in calling out the truth in the world around you, and acting as holy mirrors to persons and circumstances that are not truthful, and not reflecting the glory of God. God give us grace to be persistent in our devotional life so that we may be holy mirrors of God's love to the world!