

Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year B *All or Nothing*
Jeremiah 31:31-34

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Problem in the Text

In the time of Jeremiah, the people of God were a broken people. The section which we read today “is part of a larger collection of writings which are known as the “Book of Comfort” or “Book of Consolation.”ⁱ In Moses’ time, Yahweh had spoken from Mt. Sinai to of a covenant he wanted to make with the Hebrews. “In it Yahweh promised to liberate the Hebrews from slavery and in return they promised to act like liberated people. That meant two things: worshipping only Yahweh, and treating others in the same manner that they had been treated by God. They were to live lives that were different from those of the other nations. They were a chosen, liberated people, and their only requirement was that they were to act like it: they should be different from their idolatrous, brutal neighbors. This is the basic theological assumption of much of the Hebrew Scriptures (including Jeremiah).ⁱⁱ But they broke that covenant and returned to worshipping other gods and mistreating others. Israel “broke that covenant, resulting in their exile and new bondage in Babylonia, and now God is promising to try...again.”ⁱⁱⁱ “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. 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 (Jer 31:31-32.) Although they had been disobedient and unfaithful to God, he reaches out to them in mercy. It is a promise given to a broken people in exile.

Problem in the World

Life seems meant to break us. It doesn’t have to be a personal disaster on some kind of scale that Job suffered as everything was torn from him, but it can be. And some of us have been through such breaking. There are the life-experience traumas such as we suffer over the death of loved-ones and friends. Everyone dies, but it feels like a fresh sting each time. The relentless persistence of the “circle of life,” which brings us such joy at many stages, has a price. We are filled with joy at the birth of a baby and celebrate each development stage, each milestone of life. But then the price we pay, our comeuppance, is the certainty that life will come to an end. We suffer hopelessness as we watch the parade on the nightly news of tragedy and violence in the world. It seems so far off, but sometimes close and of “us,” such as with the news of the bombings of the Anglican churches in Lahore, Pakistan last Sunday, or when a service member is killed in combat, and she was from a town near our own hometown. A tragedy hits close to home because it has happened to friends and to friends-of-friends.

Corporate sin breaks us as a community. It’s sometimes hard to acknowledge the role we have played either actively or passively. Racism, the economy, historic wrongs, the plight of the undocumented, human trafficking – we all are involved either by the privileges we take for granted, or the coattails we’ve ridden on, or the silence we keep, or the ignorance we guard. No one gets off scot-free, no one. There is an everyday kind of breaking that we each experience. Brokenness gets extremely personal when we experience the self-awareness of sin and its effect on our lives and relationships. I often imagine what we might look like if our sin caused visible cracks on our skin, so that we had one of those “crazed patterns” like you sometimes find in the glazing of an old teacup. The patterns look like fine webbing. They are sometimes stained, possibly by the tea that continues to be sipped from that old cup over the years. You can imagine that we’d encounter one another with an immediate understanding of what the other has done or gone through. But we would all have our individual crazing, much like the uniqueness of our fingerprints. There may be some sins that would cause more of a gash on our surfaces, a wound that’s open and in danger of festering. We are a broken people. Walter Bruegemann, speaking this past week in a video on race in America entitled, “Ferguson and Forgiveness,” implores us to think about Lent as “a time for honesty that may disrupt the illusion of well-being that is fostered by the advocates of indulgent privilege and strident exceptionalism that disregards the facts on the ground. Against such ideological self-sufficiency, the prophetic tradition speaks of the brokenness of the covenant that makes healthy life possible.”^{iv} It seems we, humanity, are doomed to perpetually sip from the same cup over and over again. I know I drink from that old crazed teacup that my grandmother passed down to the next generation. It seems we all do.

Grace in the Text

In Jeremiah’s time, I think the Israelites felt their brokenness as a people. Kicked out of the Promised Land, they felt doomed to never recover as a people. They had broken the old covenant which God had made with Moses. Because of their sins, they had been scattered and there seemed no way to get back to being right with God as His chosen people. Jeremiah brought them God’s words of hope and comfort: “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... 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... 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.” God offers a “new covenant” of forgiveness for the exiled and the broken People of God, to restore them and fulfill his promise that he will be their God and that they will be his people. Forgiveness links the old covenant with Moses and this new covenant made with Jeremiah. “It was in the wake of the golden calf debacle that forgiveness emerged as a new reality for Israel. When Moses plead for forgiveness, God responded with the making of a covenant (Jeremiah 34:9-10). Forgiveness is made integral to the covenant. Similarly, God’s forgiveness is made the *ground* for the *new* covenant in Jeremiah (31:34; “for.”) God’s unilateral act of forgiveness for Israel (see Isaiah 43:25) is the basis upon which this new covenant is established.”^v His covenant is meant to reach to all of Israel, no matter where they are in the diaspora of exile.

I want you to hold that thought of what Jeremiah’s words would have meant to those who had lost hope in exile in Babylon. Hold that thought and think of what the disciples, Jews who had listened to the words of Jeremiah read out in their synagogues their whole lives, prophecy they would have known well - how they would have heard, how they would have responded to hearing Jesus say as he raised the bread and the wine in the Last Supper saying, "Take, eat: This is my Body, which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me... Drink this, all of you: This is my Blood of the *new Covenant*, which is shed for you and for many *for the forgiveness of sins*. Whenever you drink it, do this for the remembrance of me."

For the disciples and for the Christians who followed their teaching and in their footsteps, the Eucharist became the sacramental moment of joining in on this great promise of forgiveness and restoration that the Lord made to his people with Moses, with Jeremiah, and now with Jesus Christ. God is always working His new covenant, offering us forgiveness and the possibility of healthy life.

Grace in the World

Jesus embodies for Christians the new Covenant. He restores the people through forgiveness of our sins. But the covenant with Christ, if we are to be the chosen and liberated People of God, is that we act like it: “Love the Lord thy God and Love they neighbor,” essentially the same rules as they ever have been. Of course, the new Covenant is broken. Daily. But it is in that breaking that we know ourselves to need that covenant we have in Christ. God’s new covenant to us in Jeremiah harkens back, “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.” Because we know where we break, we are constantly seeking out the covenant and finding it here at the Eucharistic feast. We crave wholeness and healing and restoration. I think as Christians in community together, we do see our “crazed patterns” in one another – but the beauty of it, the grace of it, is that we also see the way that God’s forgiveness continually restores us and the patterns become beautiful testimonies of God’s love. Knowing ourselves to be forgiven turns us out into the world from this place to be among those who may feel still in exile because of their brokenness. We’ve been out in the community these past two weeks, to our neighbors in the newly constructed Potomac Yards area. We went to meet people and ask about neighborhood issues that maybe we could use our networks to help with and to offer invitations to come and celebrate Holy Week and Easter with us as Grace Church.

We’ve been inviting our neighbors in Chrilagua to come to Grace for a new ESL program, and we’ve been working with other Alexandria faith groups to address food insecurity and affordable housing issues to keep our city healthy and economically diverse.

All of our programs, from Grace School to the Food Pantry are done with love and as a witness to our community, which is founded upon God’s gift to us of forgiveness and healing. That’s how we continually proclaim that He is our God and we are His people. His covenant is written on our hearts.

Amen.

ⁱ *Written on Their Hearts*, Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year B, (Proper 24, Year C) Jeremiah 31:27-34, Rev. Dr. Stan G. B. Duncan, homebynow.blogspot.com

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

^{iv} “Ferguson and Forgiveness,” Walter Bruegemann, *ON Scripture*, Odyssey Networks, 2015. Video: *Race in America*.

^v *Commentary on Jeremiah 31:31-34*, Terence E. Fretheim (workingpreacher.org: Luther Seminary, 2015)