

Why God? Why Jesus? Why the Church?: Covenantal Promises
Northminster Presbyterian Church
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Jeremiah 31:31-34

I had a good friend a while back who was in the midst of a dilemma. Let's call him Bob. Bob spent the better part of two years remaking his body. He was always tall and skinny and, through a dedication one had to admire, he built a body that was much healthier and not coincidentally, covered in impressive muscles. His dilemma — one that sounds downright frivolous to me now but was a very serious topic of conversation at the time — he wanted a tattoo. Not a little one either. Having made his arms into a work of art, he wanted to add a dragon onto his arm. He even had it done in henna so that he could see what it would look like. And, I have to admit, it was impressive — a minimalist dragon, sort of like a calligrapher might make reaching from his elbow around the bicep up and over the shoulder. Not something I would ever do, but impressive.

But Bob ultimately couldn't commit, and his temporary tattoo was just that. It faded, week by week, and now it is gone. He didn't seem to care when I suggested that the tattoo was going to sag with age, even fade unless he reapplied the ink every couple of years. He seemed certain that if he committed he would do what it took to keep it as fresh looking as possible. But ultimately, it was too great a commitment, but it was nice while it lasted.

The God who is speaking today in Jeremiah knows a bit about temporary tattoos, I think, for that is how Yahweh had experienced the devotion of the chosen people. Time and time again, God had delivered them; time and time again, God had sent them great leaders; time and again, God had made covenants to be with them and for them — first with Abram and Sarai, then with all the Hebrew people at Sinai in Exodus, and eventually with King David and his line as you just heard — three major covenants.

For a while, the people proudly wear the mark of Yahweh on their piety and in their practices. It makes a huge difference. The people put on their faith and their obedience, wearing it like a great tattoo of honor. But that tattoo was always temporary. It always faded away in time, leaving them alone again with God's promises, not broken so much as abandoned and forgotten.

By the time we get to Jeremiah's time, the fall of Jerusalem in the 6th century BC, God has had enough of the people's temporary tattoo fervor. They had gone from the great nation of Israel to the tiny kingdom of Judah, to slavery under Nebuchadnezzar and it appears that God has had enough of the old kind of Covenant.

Walter Bruggemann says this change in the way of doing covenant announced in Jeremiah is earth shattering. He notes: "The overriding indicator of God in relationship is covenant, which sometimes is understood as a unilateral imposition on the part of YHWH and at other times as a bilateral agreement." Walter goes on: "It is precisely because the covenant is articulated in so many variations that we are able to conclude that covenantal relatedness makes it impossible for this God to be settled, static, or fixed. This God is

always emerging in new ways in response to the requirements of the relationship at hand...evoked to new responses and—we may believe—to new dimensions of awareness and resolve.” (Walter Brueggemann, *An Unsettling God: The Heart of the Hebrew Bible.*)

So, God is going to try something new, alter the tactic of the divine relationship. God knows what hasn't worked. Instead of the temporary tattoo faith, God says now I'M going to be the tattoo artist. I'm going to set my mark upon the people for all time. I will write my law upon their hearts. I will lay my tattoo of sorts on them for all time and this mark will remind them that I forgive all of their iniquity. I will not remember their sins anymore. I will love them and be with them forever, no matter what they do.

The people waited a long time for this new understanding of God's covenant to blossom, wondering how God would write the law on their hearts. The people certainly weren't expecting it to happen the way it did, that God would become a human being, that the tattoo that would be set on our hearts would bear so many images — images of Christ healing the sick, feeding the hungry, eating with sinners; images of a cross and an empty tomb.

I want to suggest that this seal that God has set up on our hearts is not the seal of our baptisms, or some tattoo that is limited to the crucifixion, but the mark is Jesus himself — a New Covenant, a new promise, that, like all of the others, isn't dependent on us keeping our part of the bargain.

In John's gospel, Jesus speaks of being lifted up and so drawing all of the world to himself. And so, we say that Christ's death and resurrection announce once and for all our freedom from slavery to death and yes, to that uncomfortable concept of sin. That is the act that tattoos the law upon our hearts. The law we already know is defined by two interrelated ideas — Love God, Love Neighbor as Yourself.

And here's where God being covenantal and calling us into covenantal relationships becomes an answer to the mad and maddening world in which we live today. To my way of thinking, one that I'll admit was influenced by the teachings of the one we called Uncle Walter in seminary (not when he was around, but you understand), covenants, particularly divine covenants, are promises made that are usually paired with promises received, but which are not mutually dependent upon one another.

If you've had any experience with contracts you immediately see how and why most contracts aren't covenants. Take the classic contract scenario from daily life — the lease on my apartment. If I pay my rent every month, they let me live in my apartment. If they do something that prevents me from living there, I don't pay. If I don't pay, they don't let me live there. Our promises to one another are mutually dependent. All of us are probably involved in dozens, if not hundreds, of contracts every month, but not nearly as many covenants.

The relationship most typically described as covenantal is marriage — that the promises made in marriage vows, like God's covenantal promises to us, are more about the relationship that is created than about the person receiving the promises keeping their end of the bargain. We don't pledge fidelity so long as the other person is faithful. We pledge

fidelity full stop, because of the nature of the relationship we want with a spouse. That's covenant.

It is true that a relationship where one person keeps the covenantal promises, and another doesn't is hard, if not impossible for us to maintain long-term. The same need not be said about God. Still, it begs the question — how different would the world be if we viewed more and more relationships as covenantal? What if we viewed more of our relationships as worthy of covenantal promises? How much deeper, how much richer could our relationships be?

I think we've all experienced the breaking of a societal covenantal relationship these past couple of months in the ongoing saga of the separation of minor children from their parents at the border when folks present themselves as asylum seekers. I think it's why what we've seen feels like such a kick in the stomach to so many. It's not just empathy; it's not just that we think what it would be like to be separated from our own children; it's that some fundamental cultural or societal promise has been violated — a covenant that first and foremost, our government and our society will protect and care for and do what is best for children, the most vulnerable people in society, and not use them as pawns in a political chess game.

Our relationship with children is not transactional where we care for them in return for them doing _____. Our relationship with children just is. It should be anyway — covenantal — that we make certain promises to them that we will not break, no matter what; that our government would so casually break those promises has shocked many, enraged many.

Professor Brueggemann would suggest that this is a reminder that the powers that be are not God, are not dependable in the same way, are not worthy of our ultimate trust in the same way that God is. As he put it in an essay he wrote in early 2016 that was tough on all sides of the ongoing political divisions in our country: "The political rhetoric to which we are now relentlessly exposed is either a) to be very afraid and angry about a system that has not kept its promises, or b) to have confidence in the restored system that will keep its promise of wellbeing and security. Either way, in fear and anger or in confidence in the system, the horizon of our political rhetoric is...limited to the claims of the US market and the promise of security guaranteed by the National Security State [justified by American exceptionalism]. ...All of that, however—market, security, exceptionalism—assume that there is no 'way' but the 'way' of the US market-security system, no 'thought' except the thought that the United States is God's most surely chosen people." (Brueggemann, Huffington Post Blog, 2/2016)

He went on in that essay to suggest that the promises we should be listening to and be motivated by are not the political ones but the divine promises — of a love greater than we can imagine, a love whose great wish for us — for us all, and for each of us — is Shalom, a wholeness that involves freedom from fear and oppression, freedom for love and justice and peace. This is a love so great that it motivates a response in return — our keeping the promises we make in baptism and confirmation and in our statements of faith — to love God and neighbor and then demonstrate that love by joining with God in Christ in working to build a world that reflects Divine love and justice for all of God's children.

These aren't just pie in the sky promises; they make demands upon us, including our loyalty to the maker of the promises, our loyalty to the source of the love we try to live every day. It's a loyalty that one day we wake up and realize it has been engraved like a beautiful permanent tattoo upon our hearts.

And part of God's promise that we can rely upon Divine promise of eternal love is that it is not something we can escape or cancel. We can forget it is there sometimes; we can refuse to look upon it; we can act as though it isn't true. But when we do, we are denying our truest selves, we are failing to fully live, but we aren't erasing the promise or the love. They are still there, ready to be a source of comfort, a source of challenge, a catalyst for change. But how do we know it is there, other than Jesus' promise? That's the tricky part. How can we see it? How can we inspire others to see it?

I have another friend who already has a tattoo, a very large one. Let's call him Jim. Jim is a cancer survivor. His cancer left him with an oddly shaped scar, in of all places, on his back. He didn't like that scar, so he decided to do something to hide it, He had a tattoo designed that ultimately would take more than 6 months to finish. It is, I have to admit, the most elaborate tattoo I've ever seen in person. It's an Asian design that includes two fish and stars and planets, And it extends from just below his neck to just above his belt. Were it a piece of art you would say it was beautiful. Perhaps many of us would find it a bit disturbing that it's on his skin, but it's undeniable that it's both impressive and beautiful. And here's the thing. Jim has never seen it, not fully. It's on his back. Other than pictures which don't capture it nearly as fully as if you see it alive, Jim can only see this work of art through the eyes and expressions of those who see it on him.

I think sometimes that the seal on our hearts is the same way. We can't see it in ourselves, not fully. But we can see it in others, in the way they love us, in the way they listen, speak, pray, hope. And we count on them to see it in us. So, I guess my question today is, do we display that seal of love, that seal of forgiveness, that seal of our eternal hope to those around us? Can they see the seal in us and, more importantly perhaps, can they come to believe that seal is on them too by the way we treat them, by the way we love them, by the way we offer ourselves to be agents of the work that God is doing in the world to bring Shalom to everyone?

Do we make the effort to look upon others with the eyes of God? Do we see them as those whom God has forgiven, as those whose wrongs God has already forgotten? Do we look at each child of God as though they bear the mark of God's eternal love written on their hearts? And can we understand ourselves that way too? If so, what does that mean about how we treat one another? About how we respond to one another's needs, one another's failings?

Friends, you bear the mark. I bear the mark. Let us look for it in one another. Let us look for it in those we encounter this week, particularly in those we don't want to see it in, those who cannot see it in themselves, for the promise of Jeremiah and the promise of Christ is that it is there. The seal has been set on every heart. Let us rejoice and let our loving response invite all the world to see it in us and in themselves until we are all living as though the promises are true. For on that day, surely, they will be.