

“Written on the Heart” (21 Mar 2021)

Jeremiah 31:31-34

A Sermon by Rev. Bob Kells, based on material supplied by UMC Discipleship Ministries

Would you join me in a word of prayer: Holy One, We pray often to that you would open our hearts so that we might hear a word from you. Today, we pray for more than hearts that are open...we pray for lives to be changed by your healing word of love. Help us to better understand this law of love. Better still, help us to put this love into action for the healing and the transformation of your world. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you. In the name of your Son, Jesus. Amen.

Today’s message is another in a series of Lenten messages, the series is called: “Rend Your Heart: Claiming the Promise.” It is part of a sermon series designed by the UMC’s Discipleship Ministries program, which provided some of the ideas and resources for this sermon.

Today we come to the 5th Sunday in Lent with another challenging message for the people of God. We talked before about the covenantal promises of God. In this lesson, God speaks of a new covenant, one that is, as the title of the message says, “Written on the Heart.”

All of us are used to writing on things. When we were children, we would write our names on our sneakers, on a book, or on our favorite toy. As we got older, we found other things to write on: math exams and essay papers, love notes, shopping lists and car payments. We write on things to remember other things.

This is an example from the pre-cell phone days (if you can remember), but folks used to write on their hand with a ball point pen to remember the phone number of that person you want to meet later...trying not to wash your hands and avoiding the rain until you got home, so that the writing didn’t get smudged and you couldn’t read it anymore.

We write on things to send a message.

A teenager puts a sign on their door that says “STAY OUT” when they’re angry or not feeling sociable. Advertisers put messages on billboards to sell goods and ideas.

T-Shirts are a great place for messages of all kinds, like: “YOU’RE NOT THE BOSS OF ME” if you’re feeling rebellious.

And nowadays, Blogs and Vlogs are popular places to post your message, to write and to show the world (or the electronically connected part of it) what’s on your mind, and what’s on your heart.

We write on walls, we write on floors, we write on ourselves in tattoos, and we write in stone.

God has done some writing too, and in today’s lesson, we hear from the prophet Jeremiah about the writing God places on the human heart.

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. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: 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 (Jeremiah 31:31-33).

Why this message of new covenant from God? Simply because God’s people weren’t working out the way God had hoped. God had made a covenant...several of them, actually...with human beings to be God to them and for them to follow God’s ways.

- God made a covenant with Noah promising not to destroy the earth again by flood.
- God made a covenant with Abraham and Sarah promising them land and descendants...a future with God.

- And God made a covenant with Israel through Moses, which gave us the 10 Commandments, the Law, which told Israel how to live in right relationship with God, and with other people.

In every instance, human beings broke the covenant God gave them. The pain was deep and real to God, for God was like a husband to unfaithful Israel. No matter how often or how hard God tried to be God to the people, the people found other gods, broke the law, shattered the relationship God had offered them. The result was judgment on Israel that would come in the form of invasion, conquest, and exile by a foreign power. All that Israel held dear would come to an end—that is a big part of Jeremiah’s message.

And yet...and yet...God was ready to try again. A new covenant is coming, but this time it is to be written on the heart. We should ponder this phrase “written on the heart.”

- Ancient peoples, the Israelites included, believed the heart was the center of one’s being. It was the location of the will, the seat of reasoning, the focal point for who and what we are.
- To have the covenant written on the heart would mean to make a deep impression on the human soul, deeper even than stone. Israel already had the Law of Moses, written on stone for them. But as they discovered time and again, a law written on stone tablets is fine. We can set them up in public places, point to them as laws to respect, and revere them as coming from God; but if God’s law isn’t followed (and it isn’t), what good are they?
- But what if that law is written elsewhere? What if it’s written where it counts most? What if God internalizes God’s law in human beings? That’s likely what God intends—to make the law part and parcel of who we are.

The idea of having God’s law inscribed on the human heart is threatening to many people.

More questions arise:

- Does this mean I am no longer independent?
- Can I choose anything anymore?
- Do I think for myself?
- Do I lose so much from this new covenant that I am no longer myself?

These are important questions, especially for us because who live in a society where we cherish our freedoms, our right to live the way we want, to make the choices in life we want. Rules, regulations, follow the law...is that all we would be left with with God’s law tattooed on our hearts?

To a certain extent, yes. But what is the root of the law God gives us? It’s here, in Jeremiah, where God says: “I will be your God and you will be my people.” God’s law is about relationship. It’s about loving and living and acting in ways that are loving toward everyone: toward God, family, neighbors, strangers. With the law of God’s love internalized within us, we are not burdened with rules to follow; instead, we are freed to love as God loves.

There’s a comment by a theologian named Woody Bartlett that describes what this freedom to love is like:

“It is the freedom to act spontaneously; knowing that one’s actions will reflect what fills one’s heart. It is the freedom to be who one truly is, knowing that one’s true character is what is most pleasing to God and therefore reflects the best of what the law requires.”¹

It is here that we meet the paradox of the gospel: When we surrender to the will of God, we become more truly ourselves. To have God’s law of love written on our hearts brings us more freedom, freedom to be who God envisioned us to be from the start.

¹ Woody Bartlett, “Jeremiah 31:31-34, Homiletical Perspective,” in David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2, Lent Through Eastertide*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 125.

- This is the foolishness the Apostle Paul spoke of: “For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18).
- This is the mystery Jesus proclaimed about life in God: “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 10:39).
- This is what is necessary to become a leader, you must learn to serve others: “So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet,” Jesus said to his disciples on the night of his betrayal, “you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you” (John 13:14-15).

We do all of this not out of a sense of obligation, but from a true desire that everyone we meet sees something of the love of God that inhabits our thoughts, our prayers, and our actions. This is what John Wesley, the principal founder of Methodism, believed to be at the heart of the character of a Methodist when he wrote:

“A methodist is one, who has the love of God shed abroad in his heart, by the Holy Ghost given unto him [or her].²

That love of God begins with knowing God. Jeremiah tells us that with the law of God’s love in our hearts, No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me” (Jeremiah 31:34).

This is the starting point for acting in love. It is a forecast, if you will, of where God is headed in relationship with humanity. One day, we will know God thoroughly, just as we are known by God even now.

In the meantime, we see the most complete picture of God in Jesus Christ, whose love for us brought him to a Cross, and a grave, and a Resurrection life with God that is ours too, if we trust in Him.

We can begin living now as if this law of love is already written on our hearts.

We will get it wrong sometimes; even in our best efforts to love God and others, we’ll make mistakes; we are, after all, human. But as the saying goes, when you make a mistake: It doesn’t matter how many time you fall, what matters is how many times you get up again.

Lent gives us the opportunity to get back up again, to make this law of love our focus, our way of living in community. In this season, we confess we have missed the mark God sets for us in loving God and loving others. At this time, we invite the Holy Spirit to get back to work writing on our hearts, so that going forward we can live and act more like the kingdom people we claim to be. Beloved, hear this message today as a call to action:

- We know we have fallen in many ways.
- And we are called to get back up and start moving again.
- We are commissioned to call out injustice wherever we see it.
- To tear down the artificial divisions that keep us apart.
- And to lift up the oppressed.

We do these things out of the love of God “shed abroad in our hearts,” to be God’s people doing God’s kingdom work of loving, healing, and reconciling in the world. All this we know is true, from words that are written on the heart. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

² John Wesley, *The Character of a Methodist*, (Philadelphia: Printed by Johnston & Justice, at Franklin’s Head, 1793, article online, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/evans/N20188.0001.001/1:3?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>, accessed 18 March 2021.