

New Testament  
Jeremiah 31:31-34  
by Gary Walters

Our scripture lesson this morning comes from Jeremiah, Chapter 31 and I'll start at verse 31. The Lord said, "The time will surely come when I will make a new agreement with the people of Israel and Judah. It will be different from the agreement I made with their ancestors when I led them out of Egypt; although I was their God, they broke that agreement. Here is the new agreement that I the Lord will make with the people of Israel. I will write my laws on their hearts and minds. I will be their God and they will be my people and no longer will they have to teach one another to obey me. I, the Lord promise that all of them will obey me, ordinary people and rulers alike. I will forgive their sins and forget the evil things that they have done." The word of God for the people of God, thanks be to God!

I would like to start with a story. When Laura and I were in seminary there was a professor, Dr. Oswalt and he was one of those larger than life characters. It wasn't that he was so intimidating or unapproachable, on the contrary he was actually a pretty personable kind of guy and pretty fun. But, he just sort of had a sense or an aura about him, one, he was extremely intelligent but the other is when you visited with Dr. Oswalt you knew you were dealing with somebody whose relationship with God was what you wished yours was. He was not only very intelligent but he was just very godly and very profound. So much so that if we were in the cafeteria and Dr. Oswalt walked in, a hush kind of fell across the room. One of those sorts of people. Well, we had Old Testament theology with him and he would end every class with a question and answer period. I don't know what the question was but it sure got him wound up and he kind of got on a bit of a tirade and was getting pretty animated and he ended with this statement: "Jesus didn't come to die for your sins, only complete ignorance of the Old Testament could lead to such an anemic understanding of the work of Christ." We all went unhhhhh! and the bell rang and he walked out. That was the end of class and we're all traumatized, all looking there with our mouths opened, slack-jawed, at each other and were like, what did we just hear? It was a Tuesday-Thursday class and that was Thursday so had to wait until Tuesday, all weekend, to find out what the heck he meant. I'm going to make you wait.

Jeremiah does say some things that relate to what Dr. Oswalt was talking about. This is a fairly well-known Old Testament passage, it's quoted on occasion, but it's easy to miss the context. The context actually goes all the way back to Jeremiah's call from God to start his ministry in the first place, or to become a prophet. And Jeremiah, like Moses,

doesn't want a thing to do with it. In fact he tells God flat out no, send someone else. But, like Moses, again, God would not hear of it. Jeremiah was the one that God had chosen and so he got roped into this. But, it's no wonder that Jeremiah was reluctant to start this ministry. God describes that Jeremiah is "I will send you against the nations and nation of Judah, in fact I will send you to tear down and destroy, to uproot..." and it goes on and on and on. Well, no wonder Jeremiah tried to get out of this. Who in their right mind would want that kind of a job description.

So Jeremiah is sent with this kind of dreadful news for the people of Israel and here's the news--that judgment is coming upon the nation of Israel and upon Judah and that trouble is on the way. As a consequence, Jeremiah gets to spend most of his life in prison. The kings in Jerusalem don't dare kill him because they know that he is a godly man and that he is the instrument of God so they don't dare touch him. But, on the other hand, they don't want him running around Jerusalem pronouncing judgment against, first of all the King in Jerusalem for the things that they were doing, but the people in the city in general also. As things play out, Jeremiah's prophecies come true and judgment does indeed come and Jeremiah is giving this word to Israel after all of these things take place. The king has now been hauled off to Babylon and is in chains. Everything of value in Jerusalem, in Judea, has been pillaged and taken back to Babylon. Everybody who had any kind of knowledge or skill that the Babylonians thought might be useful have also been taken into exile. Then the people who are left in Jerusalem and in Judea are expected to pay heavy taxes as subjects of the Babylonian king. They are trying to make sense out of all the horrible events and all these tragedies that have befallen. Because, make no mistake, the Babylonian army, mostly mercenaries, were painfully skilled at their work and what it was the king had sent them to do.

So as Israel is struggling with their identity and what all of this meant, Jeremiah comes with this word. After all, aren't these God's chosen people, aren't they the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, aren't they the ones who received the law and the covenant. Aren't they the ones that God had taken from Egypt and planted in Israel and had protected and nurtured. Well, all of that being true, and if God is truly God, if he sovereign, if he is all powerful, then why have these things happened?

The reason for the new covenant is obvious, or plain enough. Because, the history of Israel is a history of failure, it's a history of broken promises. It's a history of God's people turning their back again, and again, and again on God and the covenant and the agreement, they had made. Jeremiah offers this new hope or this new possibility. But, that old covenant lays the groundwork. I'm sure I knew this, but there is a challenge

going on right now that if you read the Bible in a year, Art and I'll throw a party for you at Space Aliens at the end, and so I'm trying to get through the Bible and as I was reading through Leviticus and Numbers I kind of had an aha! Not exactly the place you'd be riveted or struck by God's word, but there is some good stuff out there. But what got me was the repetition of again and again and again of this phrase "be holy because I the Lord am holy." This whole idea of everything that God was communicating with these laws and the rules they were receiving in the Old Testament, was basically to say every aspect of your life, every corner and every detail, needs to be done in light of the fact that you have a relationship with me and I have a relationship with you and that you are God's people so that Israel could not forget that they were God's people no matter what they were doing or what they were about. It wasn't a matter of going to the temple and offering a sacrifice or doing prayers at the right time of the day or even being born in the right family or the right people. It was about this all encompassing relationship to God.

As it turns out, this whole idea of the new covenant isn't all that new. Because in Deuteronomy, chapter 30, verses 4 and 5, God not only gives them the laws but he talks about not just circumcising their flesh but circumcising their hearts and their minds so that indeed they will be the people of God. Not just in practice, but in spirit. That was a lesson hard learned and that the people had struggled to figure out. But, as Jeremiah lays out this new agreement, there is some very telling phrases and images that he uses. He talks about God writing the new covenant on their hearts and on their minds. This isn't a covenant written on stone or scroll, but on their hearts. Especially that word, well mind is clear enough, but that word heart has to do with our ability to choose what is right and what is wrong. God is saying I will write my heart upon your ability to choose so that you will choose me. You will become the kind of people for whom obedience and relationship with God just flows naturally. It's simply a part of who you are.

Maybe even more telling is in verse 34 where he uses the word "...they will all know me." That word "know" is the same word that is used to describe the relationship between husband and wife. Two people knowing each other as they share not only a common purpose in managing and running a household and raising children and sharing the deepest thoughts and desires of their hearts with one another, but sharing every aspect of their lives, in the most intimate way possible. Jeremiah uses that image, that word, to describe the type of relationship between God and us.

That's pretty remarkable. It's kind of startling in fact. But, it reminds me of a story about golf. It's a father and a son and the son is just getting at the age where is starting to be pretty darn good at golf. He is 9 years old and this is the summer, he just turned 9,

and he asked his Dad, "Dad I really want to work on golf this summer." His dad was pretty excited about that as he was an avid golfer and so the son said, "can you give me lessons." Dad agrees and so after work they go out and they hit balls at the range and they go to the putting green and hit their chip shots and their putts and the boy gets really, really good at golf. The boy had as a goal, at the end of the summer there was a father/son tournament and he wanted to compete in that and he wanted to win, he had his heart set on it. He practiced hard and he got very, very good. The father and son spent loads of time together, they had a great experience that summer just being together and learning to play golf together. The day of the tournament comes and they play. They play pretty darn well but on the last couple of holes, as often happens with golf, tragedy befalls them. The son, who was routinely putting in 10 and 15 foot putts, missed a 3 foot putt. He couldn't believe it "Ugh, how could I miss that shot!....fall in!" The stuff that every golfer agonizes about. Then, with that fresh in his mind he gets up on the tee box and slices it and it ends up out in the swamp. They end up another stroke penalty because of that. He recovered and finished the hole okay but he was just so dejected about missing those two shots and then the rest of the groups got in and the scores were tallied and sure enough, they missed first place by two strokes. Just two strokes. He was almost in tears and he came to his dad and he said "Dad, I'm soooo sorry I missed those shots, I should have had it, I've done it a hundred times practicing and playing golf and I blew it, I missed it on the big day. We missed our goal." The father smiled and said "It's fine" and the son says "What do you mean, it's fine, I blew it, we didn't win." He said "Son, for me the goal was never winning in the first place. The goal was to spend time with you and it's been a great summer, thank you." The boy kind of got a sheepish grin on his face and said "Thanks Dad."

Well, God's goal has always been the relationship, always. That's why good isn't good enough because good was never the goal in the first place. The goal was that God wanted to make a people who were holy, as he was holy, so that they could dwell in his presence and live in a relationship with him.

Back to Dr. Oswald's quote. On Tuesday he came in and Dr. Oswald kind of gave us a sheepish look and said "I understand that my quote caused a little bit of a stir, so let me clarify. Jesus didn't come to die for your sins, he doesn't even like your sins, why would he die for them. Jesus didn't come to die for your sins because Jesus came for something far better. Jesus came so that you could live in the presence of God. In other words, Jesus' death was to unlock the gates of heaven. It was to satisfy the holiness of God, that us being less than holy, could still live in his presence and live in a relationship with him.

A lot of us have studied "The Three Simple Rules" through lent and it was a great study--there were almost 200 people involved in that, that's fantastic. In that last chapter Rueben Job, on the last rule, the rules being do no harm, do good, love God, in that last rule Rueben Job makes the point that the first two don't really mean much without the last one. Not only are they unattainable but it still misses the point. He is referring back to this whole idea that the point isn't just to be good, that the point isn't to just do good or do no harm, but the point is to love God. That loving God and being in a relationship with him, the other things follow. But, without the relationship, we are missing the point, we are missing the goal. Good isn't good enough because good was never the goal. What God wants is our hearts. And, in the "Three Simple Rules", Rueben Job talks about prayer and and he talks about going to worship and he talks about reading scripture and the other classic disciplines that nurture that faith; but what he wants to make sure what we don't miss is that it's not a matter of just checking these things off of a list. It's not a matter of fulfilling our religious obligation so that we can feel better about ourselves and that we can be acceptable to God, the goal is to become the kind of people for whom relationship with God is natural. So that prayer isn't just something we go do, worship isn't something that we come to once a week, but that prayer and worship become a part of who we are so that everything we do and everything we are about is lived in the knowledge that we are in God's presence and that we are in a relationship with him. That he is God the father and that we are his children and that he loves us and we love him. That! that's the goal!

We have a great reminder of that in front of us this morning. Jesus gave us the sacrament, the bread and the fruit of the vine. For the very purpose of reminding us that he came to sustain us, that he came to not just forgive our sins but to nurture a relationship with him. That we would live not simply by bread alone but by our relationship with God. That nourishing of our souls and our spirits and so would you pray with me?

Lord, bless these gifts of bread and the fruit of the vine, that they might be for us the body and the blood of Christ that we might be for the world the body of Christ redeemed by your blood. So, make us one with yourself and one with each other and one in ministry to all the world until you come again in your final victory and we feast with you at your heavenly banquet and we pray this in the name of the father and the son and the holy spirit, Amen.