

Reformation Sunday, October 30, 2022

Jeremiah 31:31-34

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I ended my sermon last Sunday by telling you that today a new and better word was coming from God in the book of Jeremiah, a hopeful word in the face of the difficult message that we grappled with from earlier in Jeremiah last week. In case you missed that grappling (or need a quick refresher), let me give you a recap. Last week's text from Jeremiah was a dialog between the people of Israel and God. The people were calling on God to forgive them, even though they knew they didn't deserve it, and God responded to their confession, rather shockingly, by saying "I will remember their iniquity and punish their sin." In other words, God was saying to them, "No, I will not forgive you." What had they done? They had turned away from God to the Canaanite gods and they had not kept God's other commandments, committing gross injustice not only against their fellow Israelites, especially the poor and vulnerable, but also against the immigrants and refugees among them whom God had commanded that they treat as fellow citizens. Now what remained of Israel, the southern kingdom of Judah, was in the process of being conquered by the Babylonians, and God, speaking through the prophet Jeremiah, was clear about who was behind that conquest. It was God who had appointed the Babylonians for that task, just as God had previously appointed the Assyrians to conquer the northern kingdom of Israel 140 years earlier. So that's the situation behind both last week's first reading, and this famous chapter 31 of Jeremiah that we get every year on Reformation Sunday. But to connect these texts to us, and make them more than just Bible trivia, I asked whether we might have anything in common with God's people in these Jeremiah texts. I asked how we were doing with trusting in things like power and wealth instead of God, and gave examples of how that might not be going so well for us. I could have also asked about how we're doing in matters of justice, another core theme of Jeremiah – how we're doing when it comes to caring for the vulnerable among us – the poor, the disadvantaged, the immigrant. As I read through the early chapters of Jeremiah I notice some strikingly relevant accusations: "...they take over the goods of others; like fowlers they set a trap; they catch human beings... they have become great and rich, they have grown fat and sleek... they do not judge with justice the cause of the orphan ... and they do not defend the rights of the needy." Now get this one "the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule as the prophets direct; my people love to have it so." (Jer. 5:26-28, 31) And then there's this: "everyone is greedy for unjust gain and ... everyone deals falsely." (Jer. 6:13) I don't know how that strikes you, but these words from 25 centuries ago sound to me like they could have been written yesterday about us. These aren't just Bible stories. This is about right here and right now. That's what we have to understand and accept if we are to hear the good news that God has for us in our Reformation readings today.

Because the people of Judah are in such a hopeless situation as the Babylonians are in the process of devastating their land, they at last come to realize that God is their only hope. That is where we left off last week, with the people declaring their hope in God against all hope, and with us, too, (I hope) coming to the same realization. Today's reading now changes tone dramatically. Because the old arrangement between God and God's people has failed, a new one is needed. It's crucial to notice that this is not just *another* arrangement like the old one, where God's people will agree to hold up their part of the bargain by keeping God's commandments and where God agrees to bless them when they do. That didn't work before, and it's not going to work now. Because, as further reading in the Bible will reveal, the people did not fundamentally change after their return from exile, just like people did not fundamentally change after the flood in the Noah story. And, as our little mental exercise last week in identifying the false gods we follow, we are not fundamentally different either.

So this new arrangement, this new covenant, has to be fundamentally different from the old one. And that is something that we Christians have tended to miss throughout our history. Today we celebrate the Reformation – the “capital R” Reformation begun by Martin Luther 505 years ago tomorrow. We celebrate that for a brief, shining moment a small band of scholars, pastors, and lay people recognized the church’s ongoing need for reform and took concrete steps to make it happen. That’s a wonderful thing for which thanks are rightly due to God. But like the stories of the people of Israel and Judah, it is no more than historical trivia unless there is some real connection to us and our relationship to God today. Much more important for us than the “capital R” Reformation of the sixteenth century is the ongoing “lower-case r” reformation of the church that must be a continual feature of our life together as the church. And a crucial aspect of that ongoing reform is the need to remind ourselves that God’s new covenant with God’s people is *not like the old covenant*. This is not a “we-do-our-part/God-does-God’s-part” kind of covenant. And that is true even when it comes to faith, which was underemphasized in the medieval church and which Martin Luther came to see as central to both the work of the church and to the individual’s relationship with God. Faith, Luther came to understand, is not something we bring to the table in that relationship, as though God were saying, “if you have faith, I will accept you and bless you.” There is a popular and slightly subtler way of preaching this in some circles of American Christianity that says, “God *so* wants to bless you. All you have to do is... (fill in the blank): have faith, give money to the church, try harder to be good.” And it’s so easy even for Lutherans who should know better to fall into that kind of mindset, because it comes naturally to us. It is common sense. But that is just like the old covenant, where we do our part and God does God’s. The new covenant that Jeremiah promise and that Jesus brings into effect is, let us remind ourselves, *not like the old covenant*. It is a covenant in which God does all the parts. God comes among us as one of us in Jesus to take away the sin of the world by bearing the consequences of our sin to the cross and to open the way for us to new, genuine, and abundant life by being raised from the dead. He then sends to church to proclaim that Good News, and in that very act of proclaiming Christ liberates you from your captivity to the powers of sin, death, and evil. When that Good News is proclaimed, in the words of absolution, in the singing of our hymns, in pastors’ sermons when pastors are having a good day, in the promises of baptism that we remember and the promises of holy communion that we hear as we receive Christ’s body and blood, and in our interactions with each other, which Luther called “the mutual conversation and consolation” of sisters and brothers in Christ — whenever and however that Good News is announced, it is God the Holy Spirit who gets to work to create in us the faith that is able to trust in the promises of that proclamation and make us right with God and the world.

That faith, that trust in the promises of God, was Martin Luther’s central and key idea for reforming the church. The church’s task, our “one job,” is to communicate that gospel in word and sacrament, in loving deed and care for one another, so that God might change our hearts, so that the external laws of love for God and neighbor would be written on our hearts, would become second nature, so that God’s will becomes our will, as we pray in the Lord’s Prayer, and that our actions reflect our new inner convictions.

In Jesus God forgives our iniquity and remembers our sin no more, so that we might have life that is really life, so that we don’t have to fear the darkness that is all around us in these contentious and uncertain times, but caught up in the promise of the gospel and with our hearts opened to the world that is so desperately in need of the hope that only God can give, we become willing and joyful agents of love and hope in our daily lives and interactions with one another, and agents and conduits of God’s peace. May that peace, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus so the at the reformation of the church and liberation of the world may continue. Amen.