

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 16, 2012
JEREMIAH 31:31-34
Written In The Heart

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This coming week is filled with our normal spectrum of challenges at the church. The phones are still not fully functional; the new laptops have not come in and the new desktops are still not up to where we want them to be because of problems with the new server. The good news is that the copier hasn't broken down in a whole week but the scanner is not working. Arsi Namdar and John Connors, our IT experts have told us that there is a light at the end of the tunnel – a dim light, but it is there, you just need to squint to see it. We are so used to daily tech meltdowns that I fear when everything begins to run smoothly and we can actually get work done without finding unique ways to make that happen, we may lose our finely honed creative edge.

But this week is a challenge in another way. Tuesday, the 18th is the anniversary of Bob Lee's death. For Donna and Bob's family and friends, there is an aching rawness that has returned to our hearts along with the memories of where we were when we heard the news. For ourselves and for one another, we need to honor his memory, but this Service is not about Bob; rather, it is dedicated to Bob. The Scripture is taken from the 31st Chapter of Jeremiah, the place that Bob always kept open in the Pulpit Bible. The hymns are some of those that Bob liked but knowing my own inability to get through it, we are not even going to attempt *You Have Come Down to The Lakeshore*.

I have gone to the Pulpit Bible, studied the words on the open pages and asked myself why this one chapter of Jeremiah was so important to Bob. My conclusion maybe wrong, but I have come to believe that Jeremiah was a model for Bob. The 31st chapter contains some stirring language that Bob could write in his own heart and translate into the sermons he gave.

Many folks here know that while Bob was in Chicago, he became involved in the Sanctuary movement that was active in the early 1980's. Under dictatorial regimes in Central America, any who questioned the actions of the governments were arrested and killed; poor people, lawyers, teachers, priests and nuns, including Archbishop Oscar Romero and four churchwomen, two of whom I knew from my time in Maryknoll. Refugees fleeing for their life from government brutality came to the United States seeking safety. Many in the religious community responded, declaring the ancient law of sanctuary. Churches and monasteries and convents throughout the United States, including Weston Priory here in Vermont, became places of Safety for those refugees.

The members of Bob's congregation in Wilmette declared themselves to be a place of sanctuary and several young men from Guatemala came to live there. Our government worked actively against the Sanctuary movement and for a time, there was fear that Bob might need to go on trial and there was a real possibility that the church would be raided by the FBI. Though nervous about the future, Bob persevered and helped the refugees to get into Canada and because there was no one to prosecute, the case was dropped.

Jeremiah spoke truth to people in power and for his words, was beaten, prosecuted, and imprisoned. He survived as did his words which still have the power to make us think and, sometimes to move us into action. Perhaps the Bible is open to Jeremiah because Bob found a model in the ancient Prophet. As one who overcame fear and hesitation and spoke God's word no matter the consequences, Jeremiah gave Bob strength to act on his own sense of God's law. And maybe this is Bob's lingering message to each of us: "listen to God's call and respond in faithfulness."

The chapter is filled with hope. Jeremiah writes to his people a message that proclaims God's love and forgiveness. Sure, things are tough but they are going to get better. Refined by the suffering of the exile, the people have changed and grown into faithfulness. We know from subsequent history that the people returned to Jerusalem and never again were unfaithful despite other wars and other exiles throughout generations, including the Holocaust.

Hear some of those words of hope:

I have loved you with an everlasting love (vs.3)

*See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north,
And gather them from the farthest parts of the earth.
Among them the blind and the lame,
Those with child and those in labor, together;
A great company, they shall return here (vs. 8)*

I will turn their mourning into joy, I will give them gladness for sorrow.(vs. 13)

Perhaps these verses are why Bob saw words of encouragement for himself and for all of us in that chapter and each Sunday he drew wisdom from Jeremiah as

he spoke to us his own words of encouragement and challenge sprinkled with liberal doses of humor.

But the passage that we heard today is the most captivating. Jeremiah communicated to his people not only a return to Jerusalem but also the vision of a world where justice and compassion were the norm, not the exception. A world where no one need teach the law to another for the law would be written in each person's heart. What does that mean to you? To me, it is a glorious transformation of the human character; and, if I am being pragmatic, an impossible dream.

Imagine a world that is without warfare. Imagine a human community sharing, not competing. Imagine children growing into adulthood without experiencing bigotry, bullying or the tribalism of race, economic status, religion or nationality. This, I think is the description of law written in the heart. There is no need to teach the law because it is so imprinted within the human psyche that living the law is as natural as breathing, and as life-enhancing as each breath. How far we are from that ideal.

I have mentioned before that I constantly talk back to the television. I bemoan the reports of wars and riots, asking commentators to tell me why there is such violence in our world, such stupidity. They never answer; they just move on to the next sad event. This week was particularly brutal, wasn't it? The madness and hatred of one amateur filmmaker in Los Angeles has caused riots all over the Middle East as well as the death of an American ambassador and other Embassy staff in Libya.

For all the good that we try to do as a country, we trip and fall as individuals. Tolerance for bigotry in jokes, in movies, in day to day actions in our neighborhoods poisons our ability to relate to one another. A shooting in a Sikh temple or the release of a disgusting film reinforces the stereotype of America that is nurtured by those who despise western lifestyles. In turn, the killing of American officials reinforces our stereotypes of uncontrolled Islamic fundamentalism. We all seem to be caught in the midst of a vicious cycle of violence fueled by hatred and there seems to be no way out.

When Jesus was asked, "What is the greatest commandment," he replied: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength; and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:28-31) It is true. These words of Jesus summarize the Ten Commandments and capture the spirit of the laws of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. They are what should be found in every human heart, not fear and hatred.

As I reflect on the words, "I will write it in their hearts," I begin to believe that those words, that living presence of the Divine is now and has always been within every human heart. But oh, how we humans have fought to ignore those words. In great deeds and petty incidents, we have denied the existence of the words. Let's face it, none of us are without fault. How many times have you felt the ping of conscience over some word you said or some action you took and ignored that ping. I am here to make a public confession of my own guilt. I owe my sister twenty-five cents. When I was 8 or 9, I broke into her piggy bank and made off with my ill-

gotten gain to buy something I can't even remember; probably candy bar or a comic book. Every once in a while, that ping reminds me that I still have a guilty conscience and I still owe her twenty-five cents.

Where then, is the conscience of brutal soldiers who rape and kill women in the Congo or in South Sudan? Where is the conscience of Assad in Syria? And where is the conscience of Nakouli Bassala Nakouli whose film lit the fire that is spreading throughout the Middle East? How deaf they must be to ignore the law of God that is written their hearts. Yes, the words are written in the heart of every person. I know that to be true because people like Mahatma Gandhi, Archbishop Tutu and Mother Teresa wore their hearts on their sleeves and reminded the world that we are responsible for one another. I know it is true because of people like Bill Gates whose fortune was built on a combination of creativity and raw and cut throat competition but who has paid attention to the ping and is giving back in equally creative ways. I know it is true because one of my favorite characters from Nazi times is Oskar Schindler. You may have seen the movie. Schindler was a greedy con man who decided that money could be made from the new order of the Nazis. He set himself up with a factory, got a conscription of Jewish slave labor and planned to make vast amounts of money. He heard the ping, listened to his heart, lost all his fortune and saved the 1200 Jewish men, women and children who sheltered in his factory.

Listen to the ping, hear the words written in your heart and go live the law as easily as you breathe. It has been done. It can be done. With God's guidance, it will

be done. God grant us all the strength to live in faithfulness and love. And I promise to pay my sister what I owe her. Amen.