

It's What's Inside that Counts

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The Community Church of Sebastopol
Stewardship Sunday November 10, 2013

Jeremiah 31: 27-34

During the Second World War, a group of American soldiers found themselves in an intense battle with German troops in the rural countryside of France. During the battle, one of their comrades was killed. They did not want to leave his body on the battlefield and decided to give him a Christian burial. They remembered a church a few miles behind the front lines whose grounds included a small cemetery surrounded by a fence. After receiving permission to take their friend's body to the cemetery, they set out for the church, arriving just after sunset.

A priest, his bent-over back and frail body betraying his many years, responded to their knocking. "Our friend was killed in battle," they said, "and we want to give him a church burial."

Although the priest only limited English, he seemed to understand what they were asking. "Was your friend Catholic?" "No, we don't believe so." Then I'm very sorry," he said, "but we can only bury those of the Catholic faith here."

Weary after many months of war, the soldiers simply turned to walk away. "But wait," the old priest called after them, "you can bury your friend outside the fence."

Cynical and exhausted, the soldiers dug a grave and buried their friend just outside the cemetery fence. They finished after nightfall. The next morning their unit was ordered to move out, so they rushed back to the church for one final goodbye to their friend. But when they arrived, they could not find the gravesite. Rather confused, they knocked on the church door. The priest answered and they asked if he knew where they had buried their friend. "It was dark last night and we were exhausted. We must have been disoriented."

A smile flashed across the old priest's face. "No, you weren't disoriented. Last night, after you left, I could not sleep. So I went out early this morning and I moved the fence." Nobody told him to do that, the soldiers didn't threaten him. Where did such a tender act of mercy come from? I think it just might have arisen out of a covenant, not written on stone, but written on the heart.

I know a church where a young couple, who did not have much in the way of financial resources, learned they were expecting a baby. Sunday after Sunday, church members watched the pregnancy progress. Pretty soon baby clothes appeared, necessary baby gear – stroller, changing table, diapers – was collected. A baby shower was scheduled and celebrated. Nobody called a meeting to set these things in motion; no committee took a vote; there was no request for church funds. People, without being told or asked, just began getting things together, doing what they could to help this family. Where do such acts of spontaneous caring come from? Again, my mind goes to that covenant of God, written not in stone, but on the human heart.

Throughout his life, the prophet, Jeremiah, called the people of Israel to obey God's laws. And he wasn't the only one. Time and time again, year after year, all of the great prophets called on the people to follow God's law, God's way, the path of faithfulness. It was right there, written down for all to see. "You know what the Lord requires of you," said the prophets.

But there was just one problem with this...it didn't work. Though the law was clear and God's way distinct, time and time again we preferred our way to God's way, our wisdom to God's wisdom. We wandered, we disobeyed, we rebelled. Consider, in the time it took Moses to walk down the mountain with the tablets, the people had already violated the first commandment – already making an idol, worshipping a golden calf. And so with great sadness, Jeremiah points to the tragedy of our stubborn refusal to follow God's path. Don't believe him? Just turn on the evening news. Not exactly the Garden of Eden out there. In the words of the ancient prayer from the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer: "We have done that which we ought not to have done and we have left undone that which we should have done." Or as the Apostle Paul laments about his own life, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...I can will what is right, but I cannot do it." And I know exactly what he is talking about. It is an ancient human dilemma.

But interestingly Jeremiah, the curmudgeon that he often was, doesn't just give up on us. And he insists that God is not ready to give up on us. Instead he looks forward to a brighter day when God's law, God's will, will be written, not on tablets of stone, but on the human heart. And this will have very little to do with human will or intention. It is something God initiates within us, God writing on our hearts the life that God intends for us. It is what can happen to faithful believers nurtured within a community of faith. Right now, says Jeremiah, God is busy working with each of you, forming you, shaping you into the people God wants you to be.

Sometimes we say we know a song or piece of poetry, “by heart.” It’s a nice expression. It is a testimonial that some piece of music or poetry has become a part of us, has burrowed deep within our souls, so deep that we don’t have to think about it, we just do it... “by heart.” That, says Jeremiah, is the direction God is leading us when it comes to the life of faith – not a set of rules as much as having something on the heart, able to sing the song without reading the notes. So yes, we practice generosity in a world terrified of scarcity, we practice hope in a world consumed by despair, we practice memory in a world of amnesia, we practice compassion and welcome in a world that seems consumed with a mean-spirited and fearful selfishness. We move from commandments to conversation, from rules to relationship. Here we see a vision of a whole new community, indeed a whole new people. In the words of Saint Exupery’s, *The Little Prince*: “It is only with the heart that one can rightly see. What is essential is invisible to the eye.”

A story from the African church, one many of you have heard before. In a small rural church in Kenya, the time came to receive the morning offering. When the offering plate came to a young woman, a newly baptized Christian, she set the plate on the ground, got up, and stood in it. Now we’re talking faithful stewardship. Giving all of herself to God. You just never know what might happen – what new commitments, what changed priorities – when God’s Word and love penetrate your heart.

Reminds me of the story of a little church that was having a homecoming service to which former members who had moved away were invited. One of those former members had become a millionaire. When asked to speak he recounted a childhood experience in the church. He had earned a silver dollar, his first dollar, which he decided to keep forever. But then he heard a visiting missionary preach about the urgent need for funds in his mission work. The sermon was followed with an offering. The man shared that a great struggle took place in his heart. “As a result of that struggle,” he said, “I put my treasured silver dollar in the offering basket. I am convinced that the reason God has blessed me richly is that when I was a boy, I gave God everything I possessed.”

The congregation was spellbound by this local boy made good and his wonderful story. But then an elderly little man seated in the front row stood and said, “Friend, I dare you to do it again!” We don’t know what happened next. But again, you just never know what may happen when the love of God, the path of God, is not just an interesting topic of discussion, but is in fact written on your heart.

Yes, this is Stewardship Sunday...the dreaded and feared “Sermon on the Amount.” I could give you a list of our financial needs – just what our visitors wanted to hear today: the search for a new minister and the possibility that we may have to add his/her health insurance costs to our budget, ongoing maintenance needs, expanded utility costs, costs associated with a growing church school and music program, fair pay for our dedicated church staff, ever expanding mission opportunities, and on and on. But you know all this.

But thinking about our text, I think the real issue on this Sunday and any Sunday is...who or what is in your heart and what is your heart calling you to do? This is a harvest time when we celebrate all that we have planted and reaped together in the past year. I think of mission trips, a new building, births and weddings and yes, deaths, shared as a community, times of growth, times of shared laughter and tears. But it is also a planting time as we now plant our hopes and dreams for the coming year and as we contemplate our support of the church and our shared ministry in the months ahead.

I like to think of The Community Church as a place where spiritual batteries are recharged in the setting of public worship and in one on one encounters; where music and the arts find expression through the sharing and appreciating of gifts; where counsel is given and prayer offered in time of stress; where children and youth are taught and adults given the opportunity to grow in the Christian faith; where we are encouraged, challenged, to expand our vision and caring beyond these sanctuary walls, where the high moments of life are solemnized and celebrated. And knowing all this may very well help inform your decision to grow in your financial support of this shared ministry. But ultimately you and your decision-making will be energized and sustained by what is in your hearts, how you choose to respond from that center of your personal values and priorities. What is written on your hearts? What is stirring within as you contemplate the abundance of God’s love and hope and blessings in your life?

Some words, a blessing really, of the late William Sloan Coffin, Jr., come to mind: “May God give you the grace never to sell yourself short; the grace to risk something big for something good.”

Listen to the stirrings of your heart. You will know what to do.