

## **“A Deal to Reveal”**

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts

March 21, 2021 – Fifth Sunday in Lent

Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 12:20-33

Our God is a wheeler and dealer, and ever since the time when God created people, God has made deals with them, sacred, holy agreements that we call covenants.

One of these deals that we've considered recently in our lectionary readings was the covenant that God made with Noah in all the descendants of Noah, which would all people since the time of Noah. The deal that God made a deal with us was that God would no longer bring destruction upon the whole earth. It was a gracious, one-sided deal that requires no action on our part, and God promises to maintain it even in spite of the worst of our actions. This deal was sealed with a sign in the sky, the rainbow that we can still see to this day to remember it.

Another deal that God that we've considered recently was the covenant God made with Moses and the children of Israel as they wandered through the desert. The requirements of the deal that God made with these people was written on tablets of stone in the form of the Ten Commandments. Moses offered these and many other teachings so that the people could prosper and the people could know God, how to worship God, and how to serve God and one another. The

deal that God made with the children of Israel was that if they followed these commandments, they would indeed prosper, they would be blessed. But if they strayed from following these commandments, they would experience pain and destruction. Straying from the commandments, unfortunately, was the way many in Israel chose throughout much of their history. They chose the path that leads to ruin rather than the one that leads to blessing.

Today's reading from Jeremiah was written not long after the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. It was written by the prophet Jeremiah after most of the people had been taken to Babylon in exile. The conquered people had lost the place where they heard God's Law, where God's teaching was read for them, where they meditated upon it, and where they worshiped God in praise for this gift of Law. So Jeremiah offered them a word of hope that there would be a new deal that God would write on their human hearts. I wouldn't be just a deal that would be remembered by a sign in the sky or one that would be written in stone or parchment, but one that would be written within us, one that didn't require a temple for it to be housed, one that did not require a written word or a priest or a teacher to explain it. This was the new deal of God for all people: God's ways would be written within us, on human hearts.

In the ancient Near East, the heart was understood not merely as the place where our feelings resided, the place where we feel warm fuzzies

when we are in love and burn when we feel anger. For them, the heart was the center of all thought and will, not just the place where emotion sprang up. The heart was the center of the whole being, and this is where God's law would be written, unmediated by scribes or priests. It would be a direct revelation of God and God's ways, which are beyond any words that we humans could use to express these things.

For can human words adequately offer expression about God, who is beyond human words? Sometimes we can better understand God we experience moments of awe, when we gather to worship or we experience great beauty. Sometimes, God is revealed when we find ourselves in liminal spaces, where the veil between this existence and the next one is thin, such as in moments of new birth or in death. Sometimes, it's in these places that we can experience God even better than we can through the written word that we are offered.

Friedrich Schleiermacher, who is one of my favorite theologians and not just because he has a wonderful name, was a scholar who taught in Germany in the early 19th century. Concerning Jesus, he taught that what made Jesus uniquely divine and perfect was the Jesus, the man of Nazareth, was perfectly aware of God's covenant that was written upon his heart, the law of God expressed to him internally. And what made Jesus unique among all human creatures who have walked this earth was that he was not only aware of this perfectly, but he was perfectly obedient to it. Because of this awareness and obedience, Jesus was

willing to suffer everything for the good of all, to plant his life in the ground so that it could spring up again and bring new life to all. And through the obedient life of Jesus, God's ways are revealed.

Martin Luther in his *crucis theologica*, or “Theology of the Cross,” tells us that God's salvation is revealed through Jesus’ saving action on the cross. And not only that, something of God’s nature is revealed through our own suffering, when in our own lives we have our moments of solidarity with a suffering God, we understand the character of God. We can feel within us what it means to be like Christ. God meets us in these places; God meets us in the midst of our messy lives. God experiences our pain and sorrow and does so for the good of all people. And through the cross, God's highest law of love is revealed.

God's revelation and did not cease at the cross and it did not cease in the stories of the gospel about the life of Jesus. We believe that God continues to speak directly to our hearts, revealing truth to us and through us. And we believe that these truths revealed are the highest truths, the highest ways of love. In this Lenten season, we were reminded that in times where we find ourselves wandering in wilderness places, is then that we can be more sensitive to these messages of God teaching us the highest ways of love. This is exactly what Jesus taught in his Sermon on the Mount when he said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit...Blessed are those who mourn...” (Matthew 5:3-4). It's when we have these moments of spiritually poverty that we can

become more aware of God's presence and more receptive to God's message being written on our hearts.

Charles Dickens in *Great Expectations* wrote this: "Suffering has been stronger than all other teaching and has taught me to understand what your heart used to be. I have been bent and broken, but I hope into a better shape." Wilderness-wandering moments when we hurt, moments when we suffer, can be tenderizers of the heart. They can lead us into becoming more of what God has called us to become. We can become more receptive to God's word to us. We can become more loving, more like Christ. And, friends, this is our goal as Christ's disciples.

Today, dear friends, we know that in our lives and in the lives of others throughout our world, we need a new revelation of God's highest law of love in our hearts. Each of us needs this, and we need this in the life we share as a church, not just here in this room, but capital C Church. The followers of Christ everywhere around the world need a new message of God's highest law of love.

Earlier this week, we heard proclamations from some of our sisters and brothers in this Church of ours, the universal Church, concerning what God's plan is for humanity, that is what belongs in God's plan and what doesn't belong in God's plan, or which relationships between people are blessed and which relationships between people are condemned.

I say this: The highest law, higher than any human law, higher than any law written in Hebrew or Greek or Latin, the one written on human hearts, is this: Whatever increases God's love is part of God's plan. Whatever robs people of love is that which is truly sinful.

So on this second day of spring. Let God's word, which is planted directly in your hearts, grow as you love. May the moments in your life where you feel your heart being tenderized soften your soil and allow for God's love not only to grow, but to flourish in your life. May the Balm of Gilead, the healing power of God's love, be not only with us and within us this day, but be upon all of Christ's Church throughout the world, and may it be upon all of God's children everywhere. Amen.