

Sola Fides

Our passage from Jeremiah this morning comes from a section of the book known as “the Little Book of Consolation.” Although Jeremiah is best known as a prophet of disaster, of dire warnings and deep lamentations, in just a few chapters near the middle of the collection of his prophecies and story we have some of the most beloved promises of God’s care for God’s people. This morning, we’ll take a quick look at the context and meaning of part of this statement of God’s love and see how both context and content are reflected in key verses from Romans, in the work of Martin Luther, whose focus on those verses from Romans began the Protestant Reformation, and on our own situation, as we seek to carry on the spirit of the Reforming Church in our own troubled times.

Let’s remember first the context in which Jeremiah wrote these verses from the Little Book of Consolation. The glory days of Israel under David and Solomon are long since past. Their United Kingdom has split with ten of the Twelve Tribes of Israel forming a new kingdom with its capital in Samaria, leaving only the tribes of Judah and Benjamin faithful to the descendants of David with their capital in Jerusalem. The chroniclers and prophets see this split as both the result and continuation of the people’s falling away from God and they warn of consequences to come. Indeed, the divided kingdoms face nearly constant warfare with larger, more powerful neighbors and the Northern Kingdom is destroyed by the Assyrians, its cities leveled, its leaders killed, its people taken away and scattered across the Assyrian Empire, never to be heard from again. In the Southern Kingdom, there are sporadic attempts at reform but the legacy of contempt for God’s law is too well established, engrained, it seems, in the very hearts of the people. Jeremiah has proclaimed to the people God’s view of the situation: “The sin of Judah is written with an iron pen; with a diamond point it is engraved on the tablet of their hearts”. The worship of God is abandoned or takes second place to the cults of the local fertility gods, the poor are ignored or mistreated, every man does what is right in his own eyes. Jeremiah and others warn the leaders and the people to listen to the word of God, to reform their policies and their lives but human pride and self-centeredness rule the day. Finally, the Kingdom of Judah falls, too, to the Babylonians. Jerusalem is destroyed, even to the Temple of the Lord, and the elite of the nation are forcibly exiled to Babylon, leaving only a pitiful remnant in the Land of Promise. Jeremiah has written to the exiles, recommending that they prepare for a long stay in exile.

But now he has a new word; a word of hope. God’s Chosen People had not been able to follow the covenant that God had given them to live by, the law that God gave to the newly freed slaves as they fled Egypt, a law that would have guided them into peaceful, abundant lives, and so now God promises a new covenant. The hearts of God’s people will be engraved with sin no longer but “says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” The old covenant had been written on tablets of stone, broken both metaphorically and literally, but the new covenant will inhabit the very hearts of the people, not their emotional centers, as we think of hearts, but the seats of their intellect and their will. Before Jeremiah, Ezekiel had seen this future as well: “I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh”. Dwelling as it will in their hearts, the new covenant will be unconditional; it is a gift from God for God’s people.

Sola Fides

Jeremiah and his contemporaries did not live to see the inauguration of the New Covenant. That came many years later with Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah. In our second reading for this morning, we find Paul taking up the theme of replacement of the old covenant with the new and writing to God's people not in the old seat of empire, Babylon, but in the new seat of empire, Rome. Like their predecessors in Babylon, the believers in Rome lived with a certain sense of exile and danger. Some of them may have been literal exiles, descendants of the Jews whom Pompey carried to Rome in chains in 61 BCE. Some may have been recently returned exiles, trickling back into Rome after Claudius Caesar expelled Jews and Christians in A.D. 49. All certainly would have experienced the sense of dislocation and alienation common to God's people in a pagan land, citizens of the Kingdom of God in the heart of the Empire of Caesar. The lives of the Christians in Rome would have seemed as dangerous and unsure as the lives of the Judean exiles in Babylon.

And like the exiles in Babylon, the Christians in Rome had their share of false prophets. While the false prophets of Jeremiah's time looked to their own adherence to the Law, perfect in their own eyes, to guarantee God's protection against the Babylonians, the false prophets in Paul's time were insisting that the law of the old covenant was still in force, insisting this in the very name of the new covenant that God through Jeremiah had promised was replacing the old. Paul wanted to make sure the Christians in Rome did not fall under the sway of these Judaizers or Legalizers. "But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed," he writes. As Arland Hultgren of Luther Seminary in St. Paul points out, Paul uses a special word for "now" to emphasize the radical break between the past and the present, between the old covenant and the new. "Now, as never before," we might say, "completely apart from the law, God has disclosed righteousness to us." We are no longer subject to judgment under the law of the old covenant for now our righteousness comes to us as a gift, through the faithfulness of Christ Jesus and through our faith in Christ which is itself a gift, as Paul wrote to the Ephesians. The old struggle of trying to live up to God's standard is over – none but Jesus had ever succeeded in achieving that mark. Now, we are simply able to react to God out of gratitude and love, not to earn God's favor but to give thanks for it.

We have reason to believe that Paul's teachings were received with joy by the church in Rome, because they preserved this letter and saw that it was spread throughout the churches of the early Christians, soon to be used among them universally. But as Thomas Aquinas was fond of quoting from our friend Jeremiah, "The heart of man is perverse and unsearchable, who can know it?" Many hundreds of years after Paul had written his letter to the Romans, the Church of Rome had become the center of empire itself, jealous of its temporal prerogatives as well as the spiritual. Now the Church needed funds to support its empire and it gathered those funds by exploiting the same tendency in humankind that Jeremiah and Paul had worked to defuse, the tendency to look for rules and laws to guarantee their salvation. Now there were precise rules for how and what to confess, what penance one must do for what sins, and, most troublesome to a young monk named Martin Luther, exactly how much money one must pay to the bishop to ensure a shorter stay in purgatory.

Like God's people in the times of Jeremiah and Paul, the Christians of Luther's time lived with insecurity. They might have been titular subjects of the Holy Roman Empire but the Empire functioned as a loose confederation of often-warring city-states, each far more loyal to a minor

Sola Fides

princeling than to the Emperor or the Pope. We should not judge them too harshly for being so ready to fall into the trap of the new legalism. And certainly many of them shared Luther's sense of despair over their own sin and then his sense of freedom and blessing in the rediscovery of Paul's message of God's grace. "Sola Fides" was the cry of Luther and his followers, "Faith Alone," and although it took nearly 500 years for Protestant and Catholic to be officially reconciled, "The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" issued in 1999 by both the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Foundation at last sealed the rift on the point of salvation by faith.

But even with this mark of healing, it still falls to the church in every age to be engaged in its own reform. We must always be on the alert that we do not fall into new traps of legalism, that the love of God revealed in Christ flows through us and calls the world into the Beloved Community of God. As just one of the streams of Christian understanding which emerged from the Protestant Reformation, we Baptists are part of the Reforming Church in our day. I still treasure the words of a local Lutheran pastor who told his congregation of our plans to build senior housing and then told them, "This is what a Reforming Church looks like." Still, we must carry the Good News of Christ Jesus and God's love to those who are seduced by the new legalism, the ones who are told that they can earn the abundance of God and the prosperity of this world if only they have enough faith. God does not measure our faith; it is not a different kind of works. Faith is the gift of God, unearned and unexpected. In Mark's Gospel, we find the words that can be the prayer of each of us: "Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief." God will grant to each of us as much faith as we need to take our place in God's plan. We will see in the richness of that faith that the riches of this world are as nothing.

This week, as I was reading the lectionary-based website of Lutheran scholar Paul Nuechterlein, I came across a story that tells quite wonderfully of how our lives are changed by grace and love rather than by law. It is a story which Nuechterlein quotes from Walter Wangerin, Jr. I'm a fan of Wangerin's work but I have never read his book, The Manger is Empty, in which this story appears. As a pre-teen, Wangerin's son, Matthew, made a practice of stealing comic books. For three years, Matthew's parents tried everything they could think of to break him of this habit. Finally, in desperation, Walt spanked the boy, though he did not believe in corporal punishment and had never before resorted to it. Afterwards, with the boy dry-eyed, the father went off and wept. Matthew never stole again but here's Wangerin's telling of how his son was changed not by law but by grace:

What wasn't true, however, was how I thought the change had occurred in my son. I thought it was the spanking. I thought the law had done it.

The law can do many things, of course. It can frighten a child till his eyes go wide. It can restrain him and blame him and shame him, surely. But it cannot change him. So it was with Israel. So it is with all the people of God. So it was with Matthew. Mercy alone transfigures the human heart -- mercy, which takes a human face.

For this is the final truth of my story:

Years after that spanking, Matthew and his mother were driving home from the shopping center. They were discussing things that had happened in the past. The topic of comic books came up. They talked of how he used to steal them, and of how long the practice continued. Matthew said, "But you know, Mom, I haven't stolen comic books for a long, long time."

Sola Fides

His mother said, "I know." She drew the word out for gratitude: "I knooooow."

Matthew mused a moment, then said, "Do you know why I stopped the stealing?"

"Sure," said his mother. "Because Dad spanked you."

"No, Mom," said Matthew, my son, the child of my heart. He shook his head at his mother's mistake. "No," he said, "but because Dad *cried*."

Hereafter, let every accuser of my son reckon with the mercy of God, and fall into a heap, and fail. For love accomplished what the law could not, and tears are more powerful than Sinai. Even the Prince of Accusers shall bring no charge against my son that the Final Judge shall not dismiss. Satan, you are defeated! My God has loved my Matthew.

And so, too, does our God love us. God who set aside the law to come to us instead as Immanuel, God With Us, to weep over Jerusalem and the death of Lazarus and to forgive even those who nailed him to the cross. Luther was right; our God is a mighty fortress. God's love, just as the Psalmist sang, is like a river glorious. Our God is indeed our guiding star in these times of economic turmoil and wars in every corner of the globe. But above all, our God is love, for us and for all humankind and all creation. And in the voice of Jesus, the lover of our souls calls to us, softly and tenderly, "Come home, come home, ye who are weary, come home." Don't worry about measuring up under the law. Don't worry about who you are or aren't in the world's eyes. Listen to God's word of mercy and grace: O sinner, come home.