

Wesley United Methodist Church

March 22, 2015

"The God of Second chances."

Jeremiah 31:31-34

A national magazine for pastors once carried a rating system for sermons similar to the rating system we're familiar with for movies. It went something like this. The person who designed it was a little bit cynical. Here is the rating he gave to various kinds of sermons:

"G" - Generally acceptable to everyone. Full of inoffensive, childlike platitudes; usually described as "wonderful" or "marvelous" by those who leave church to shake the hands of the pastor.

"MC" - For more mature congregations. At times this sermon makes the gospel relevant to today's issues; it may even contain mild suggestions for change. Often described as "challenging" or "thought provoking," though no one intends to take any action or change any attitudes.

"R" - Definitely restricted to those not upset by truth. This sermon "tells it like it is" and threatens the comfortable; most often described as "disturbing" or "controversial"; usually indicates that the preacher has an outside source of income (since his/her job security is definitely suspect).

"X"- Positively limited to those who can handle explosive ideas. This sermon really "socks it to 'em." It is the kind of sermon that landed Jeremiah in the well, got Amos run out of town, set things up for the stoning of Stephen; always described as "shocking" or even in "poor taste." The pastor who preaches this sermon had better have his or her suitcases packed and life insurance paid for.

According to this rating system the prophet Jeremiah was definitely an X-rated preacher. More than any other prophet, Jeremiah suffered as a result of his preaching. People rarely wanted to listen to his words. And no wonder. It seemed, even to Jeremiah, that all he ever talked about was bad news. At one point Jeremiah cried out: "Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction..." (Jer.20:8).

Jeremiah came from a family of priests. God called him to become a prophet at a very young age, and he served God for more than 40 years. He spoke God's words during the reigns of three kings and witnessed the nation's destruction by the Babylonians. He is called the Weeping Prophet because he also wrote the Book of Lamentations after Jerusalem was destroyed including the Temple and its people carried off into captivity.

Jeremiah was also a suffering prophet who was persecuted by kings and rejected by his own people because of his forceful condemnation of idolatry and social injustice. Eventually, according to Jewish and Christian tradition, Jeremiah was killed in Egypt by his own people who had fled there.

God had called Jeremiah to "tell it like it is" to a people who had disregarded God's law. They rejected his teachings and they suffered for it. And he suffered as well because of their rejection. So it is quite refreshing to come to today's reading from Jeremiah. No fireworks. No scolding of the people of Israel. Jeremiah changes his tone altogether.

This passage was written during Israel's exile. It was a dark time in Israel's history. It's been said that the task of the prophet is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. Jeremiah had done his job superbly of afflicting Israel, now it is time for him to be a comforter during their time of exile. In fact, this section is often called the "Book of Consolation." The words are so beautiful and so profound that they are welcome to our ears just as they were to the ears of Jeremiah's audience: (Script. 31:31-34)

Let's think about those moving and hopeful words for a few moments. God is making a new covenant with Israel. Jeremiah is saying that God is making a new contract or covenant with the People of Israel. God is giving the people of Israel the chance to begin again. That's the wonderful thing about God, isn't it? God is a God of second and third and even fourth chances.

One night in a church service a young woman felt the tug of the Holy Spirit in her heart. She responded to God's call and accepted Jesus as her Lord and Savior. The young woman had a very rough past, involving alcohol, drugs and prostitution. But, the change in her was evident. As time went by she became a faithful member of the church. She eventually became involved in ministry teaching young children. It

wasn't very long until this young woman had caught the eye and the heart of the pastor's son. The relationship grew and they began to make wedding plans. This is when the problems began.

You see, about one half of the church did not think that a woman with a past such as hers was suitable for a pastor's son. The church began to argue and fight about the matter. So the SPRC (Staff/Pastor Relations Committee) decided to have a meeting. As the people made their arguments and tensions increased, the meeting got completely out of hand. The young woman became very upset about all the things being brought up about her past. As she began to cry, the pastor's son stood to speak. He could not bear the pain all this was causing his wife-to-be. He began to speak and his statement was this: "My fiancée's past is not what is on trial here. What you are questioning is the ability of Christ to wash away our sin and make us new persons. So, does he wash away sin or not?"

Powerful question: Does Christ wash away sin or not? If he does not, we are all in trouble.

Ever hear of trick soap? The soap bar looks like a real bar of soap, but when you wash with it, you get dirty instead of clean. The more you wash, the dirtier you get. There was even an episode on Candid Camera when Allen Funt was the host. It was comical.

It would be comical if soap did not get our hands clean. If Christ does not wash away our sins, it would be more than comical; it would be tragic. In Jeremiah, God says to us, "I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

God is the God of second chances, God had a contentious relationship with Israel and indeed with all humanity. But Israel was God's chosen people. They were to be a light unto the world in God's behalf. In this passage from Jeremiah, God calls himself a husband to Israel. But Israel continually wanders away. And God has to keep tugging her back. God loves Israel too much to leave her in sin.

God also loves us and sent Christ who has made a new covenant with us. It's not really a new covenant. It's a covenant that Jeremiah foretold and Christ made possible 2,000 years ago. Do you remember that on the night Jesus was betrayed, he took the cup, and said, "This is my blood of the new covenant which is poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins"? The covenant has already been made, but many of us have not appropriated that covenant in our own lives. God said through Jeremiah, "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people..." That happens as soon as we welcome Christ into our lives. It happens to us the moment we confess of our sins, repent of those sins, and invite Christ to make a home in our hearts. God is a God of second chances. Why don't you take the opportunity to make a new start today?