

Cardiac Surgery
Jeremiah 31: 31-34
Don Lincoln

The heart is a place of great mystery, but you wouldn't know it, the way you and I talk.

"Listen to your heart. That's how you'll know what to major in at college, which guy to marry, which job to accept. Listen to your heart!!" We act like we know exactly what that means. In so many arenas of life we use heart language. We describe a person without compassion as "heartless." Our deepest hurts we call "heartaches." Jilted lovers are "heartbroken." How many of us have urged someone else to "have a heart?"

Good people have "hearts of gold." If we need to speak at an intimate level, we ask for a "heart to heart." If someone shares something personal, it was "from the heart." When we truly love someone, we do so "with all our heart." And when we have lost our passion for a project we say, "My heart's just not in it."

So – let's get to the heart of the matter!

The first 30 chapters of Jeremiah explain why Israel deserves the Babylonian exile they are currently experiencing as Jeremiah is bringing God's message to them.

God took the Hebrews by the hand and liberated them from slavery in Egypt. God delivered them to a promised land. In return for God's favor, the Hebrews promised to act like liberated people. They would be different – particularly different – from their more brutal, idolatrous neighbors.

They would worship God alone, and would treat others in the same manner as they had been treated by God. They would create a community of justice in which the weak would be cared for. Slavery of neighbors would be banned; and aid would be given to anyone – ANYONE – in need.

Deuteronomy outlines the theology of this covenant. "You shall love the stranger, for YOU were strangers in the land of Egypt." You are "not to be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow's garment in pledge." Why? "**REMEMBER**.....you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you."

But instead of this Jubilee kingdom, the Israelites evolved into a society of economic exploitation and oppression **rivaling** that of their neighbors. Jeremiah recounts: "They know no limits in deeds of wickedness; they do not judge with justice the cause of the

orphan, they do not defend the rights of the needy. Shall I not punish them for these things, says the LORD?”

They had broken the covenant. Now they're in bondage in Babylonia. But NOW, Jeremiah announces that the day is coming when in spite of their sin, God will give them a second chance to participate in the world God intends. God promises to make available for them a **NEW** covenant. It would not be new in terms of content — but in terms of location. This new covenant would not be imposed upon them from the outside, but would be “within them; written on their hearts.” There it is – heart language again.

Jeremiah says for those who respond to this new heart-felt covenant, two radical things will occur. First they will no longer need to learn of God from others, for they will “know the LORD” from the inside. This is not mere religious education. It isn't a list of doctrines to memorize for confirmation class. It is an internal reality that engages ones' very being. Like no longer needing to read the notes, or read the lyrics – because you “**know the song by heart.**”

And the second thing, Jeremiah says, is the very basis of the first. “I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.” All this change will occur in the people **BECAUSE** God has forgiven their iniquity. Everything in this covenant – and this sense of beginning anew – depends entirely on God's forgiveness. Realize it; accept it and a new life opens up; you are changed from the inside out because of what God has done for you. It's like having heart bypass surgery and finding out how your heart feels when it is finally getting the right amount of blood pumped through it for the first time in a while. You feel renewed; rejuvenated. You are not out of breath.

That's why this passage is sometimes called the “little gospel” in the Old Testament. For it is **SO** like the covenant of grace given us by God in Jesus. It mirrors what, in the very best sense of the words, Jesus says to Nicodemus – a Pharisee who came by dark of night to speak to Him because he trying to figure out who Jesus is – and Jesus says, “Nicodemus, you must be born again.”

“You must be born anew, born from above.” Your life needs to be rearranged and reframed by this God and God's love. Which is what you and I know the gospel proclaims. In the redeeming work of Christ, you and I experience the **heart of the matter** – God's forgiving, and therefore **transforming** love.

If you and I read and listen to what Jesus teaches, the old covenant hasn't changed in nature, just location. And it has the same reason – born out in God's forgiveness of iniquity. We are still, according to Jesus, to go the second mile; give our coat as well as our shirt; see the Samaritan as our neighbor; feed the hungry, visit the sick and imprisoned, proclaim liberty to the captive. We are still called, like ancient Israel, to be a different people; to have hearts that have been rearranged for the sake of the gospel and the sake of the world.

How lovely that all sounds to a preacher, as I say it. Just a lovely recitation of Jesus' teaching and scripture and the impact.

But cardiac surgery is significant – and costly – and often more than a little bit painful. The end result is a changed life – but cardiac surgery is not an insignificant event.

Let this video from Heartsong Church illustrate what this might look like:

Transcript of video

Pastor Steve Stone, Heartsong Church: I'll never forget the morning that I saw an article about a group of Muslims who had bought 30 acres and were planning to build a complex. When I saw that my stomach tightened up. They were going to be right across the street from us. I felt that ignorance and that fear so I prayed, "Lord, what are we supposed to do?"

Dr. Bashar A. Shala, Memphis Islamic Center: The idea of the Memphis Islamic Center started because we felt we needed a family life center; a place for people to pray and play; to socialize; and have a sense of community. It is a difficult time for Muslims in America. We did not expect to be welcomed. We thought we'd have to work hard. One day we were driving by and we saw a banner. The banner said, "Heartsong Church welcomes the Memphis Islamic Center to the neighborhood."

Mark Sharpe, member of Heartsong: Me and my wife both were thinking about leaving the church because I just did not accept what was going on. I went to Pastor Steve and asked him, "What are we doing?" He told me to read the gospels. I read through those gospels and I figured out that I was the problem. What was going on with the world today? I was the problem.

Dr. Shala: Then we started building. The month of fasting, the month of Ramadan was supposed to be our Grand Opening day where we start praying here. It was clear that we were not going to have our hall ready. We got a call and Bashar said, "We just wondered if we could use your building for our prayers in case we don't get our permit in time?" Instead of using the room for a few nights, we ended up spending the entire month of Ramadan at Heartsong Church. Ramadan brought us much closer. People started knowing each other on a personal level.

Mark Sharpe: We had done coat drives and food drives and close to 9/11 we do a blood drive together. I would have never thought that I would be friends with Muslims and I love it. My world got bigger.

Dr. Shala: We are a better congregation. We are better people because of this friendship with Heartsong.

Pastor Steve: It's an amazing friendship that I can't imagine having missed out on.

That was heart surgery. In individuals, in a congregation, in a community. Two faith communities, clearly with theological differences – not insignificant ones – but whose hearts, because of their faith, grew large enough to embrace one another as neighbors, and enjoy their common reality as people of faith who want to make a difference in the world and acknowledge that all people are children of God.

In a season of division, prejudice and fear, may God continue to work upon our hearts, and do what surgery is necessary in and through us that these hearts of ours might beat more fully with the love of God for all.

May it be so. AMEN.