

Fifth Sunday of Lent  
Year B  
March 21 2021

In the Name of One God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The old saying goes: *Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.* I don't know if there can be a more seemingly innocuous and yet seriously damaging saying than this.

Words kill.

What we say has consequences – especially when what we say is sexist, misogynistic, racist and homophobic.

When leaders - elected or not - call for a fight, a fight ensues.

When a parent utters a racist remark, children internalize that other human beings are somehow inferior to them.

When a pastor refers to women as temptations, women get killed.

Over the last couple of weeks – in quite visible and awful ways – the Christian church has been acting from and communicating sexist, misogynistic, and homophobic lies.

And we have seen the devastating consequences of the church's obsession with sexual purity, sin and biblical commandments.

We have seen the numbers. The bodies. Eight people lost. Six Asian women. Just this week. In one location.

A Baptist pastor from Missouri argues that women simply don't understand that God made men to be drawn to beautiful women and that women must try to look attractive. "But you say, 'how can I do that?' Oh, I'm so glad you asked that question," this particular pastor said in a recent sermon. "If you were sitting in my office, here's the first thing I'd say to you. And boy, I hate to say this: weight control."

Of course the other Baptist church says, don't look at a women with lust in your heart.

The Catholic Church spoke to the entire world saying that bestowing a blessing on a same-sex couple's relationship would be an "imitation" of the nuptial blessing, and God, the Vatican emphasized, "does not and cannot bless sin."

The church that the Atlanta shooter attended views – without distinction - "adultery, fornication, homosexuality, bisexual conduct, bestiality, incest, polygamy, pedophilia, pornography, or any attempt to change one's sex, or disagreement with one's biological sex as sinful and offensive to God."

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I have some different ideas about what might be sinful and offensive to God.

But of course – there is no written commandment I can point to that says, “thou shall not be a racist, misogynistic, homophobic instigator of violent action against marginalized communities.”

Instead I can only speak to what is written on my heart.

My heart says: “thou shall not be a racist, misogynistic, homophobic instigator of violent action against marginalized communities.”

In this case, I know I can trust my heart – for the bible tells me so.

Thank God for this reading from Jeremiah and the covenantal promise of love, belonging and hope we find in it.

*“But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, 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. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.”*

We have heard about Covenant before. God made a Covenant with Abraham and the people. He would be there God and they would be his people - protected and secure.

After the promise is made, lots of stuff happens – we know the main points: Moses leads the people out of slavery in Egypt into the wilderness. They seem to forget the covenant. They get scared and needy. They turn to other Gods. God gets clear with them. Writes commandments on stones. Big hearty stones. Strong stones. Seemingly unbreakable – like the covenant.

The people enter the promised land. They have kings and wars. They are overtaken. The temple is destroyed. The people are sent into exile. More than once.

Exile.

Much like the experience of the wilderness: the experience of exile includes a lot of wandering, a lot of distress and a lot of temptation - the temptation to turn from God is great for the people. And turn turn turn they do. The covenant is broken. Not by God – but by us - or by folks like us. God sends prophets to talk with the people – maybe to speak a little sense into them.

Jeremiah is one of the prophets who comes on the scene while the people are in exile. He mostly speaks a lot of judgement (for the people were turning away from God) – except for two chapters which make up what are known as the “book of consolation” or “book of comfort.”

It is from these two chapters our passage this morning comes. It is from these two chapters and this passage that we can find our good news: God is establishing a new Covenant with God's people.

It turns out the covenant with the Israelites wasn't as strong as the stones might represent. Stones crumble. Scrolls are lost. Yet, the law written on one's heart endures.

And what is this law? What is written on our hearts?

*God says: You belong to me. I have forgotten your sin. You are wholly and completely forgiven. And there is nothing you can do to break free from this love. And not only that – you will feel the love and know it – just as you know me – intimately, inwardly, mutually.*

Its sounds pretty idealistic, doesn't it. Maybe even desperate. How desperate our God must be to draw the people – to bring us – over and over again – across generations - back to life in God's love?

What did the people think when Jeremiah spoke these words to them?

I don't know what they thought, but I like how one commentator puts it: **The power of this prophetic vision lies not in the ease with which it could be accomplished, but in the opportunity for something truly new set out in front of the prophets hearers and readers** (Jon Berquist in Feasting on the Word p 127).

Many of us Christians understand the complete mercy and forgiving love of God through our relationship with Jesus – who once and for all defeated sin and death through the events we mark starting next week.

But this story from Jeremiah comes centuries and so many generations before Christ - and this story stands on its own in illustrating how God feels about the law and the covenant and what happens if that law and covenant is broken by us.

We know that we mess up, that we sin and turn away from God and toward other temptations – money, power, etc – but God is desperate to bring us back into God's life of love - over and over again - and we can do nothing to separate us from that truth.

When we sin (which we do), we can seek forgiveness - confident in God's love for us and secure in our love for ourselves (in whom God delights). God will remember our sin no more. We do not ever need to harm ourselves or others out of a sense of the need for eliminating sin.

So, when a preachers stand up in church and tell us that homosexuality is a sin, or masturbation is a sin, or in anyway expressing our beauty or the god-given sexuality that is part of our whole being (in which God delights) is a sin – they are speaking not from biblical truth but from a destructive and deadly insecurity.

This is not the message of Christianity. This is not the law of God. This is not the law of Love.

The Law of God is so simple: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and love you neighbor as yourself (and start with yourself – you are amazing and beautiful!!)

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This is all we need to preach - so if we Christian preachers are not emphasizing Gods forgiving love – but rather preaching our personal and unnuanced view of sexual immorality – we are using the power of the pulpit to dehumanize and destroy life.

And to be sure – the responsibility of preaching God’s love does not rest with the ordained.  
It rests with all of us.

My friends, our religion is being perverted and people are dying. We must speak up.

Our God is doing something new – right this minute – with you and with me.

Our desperate God is always doing something new.  
And writing instructions on our heart.

So the question is...

Today – in this broken world – what has God inscribed on your heart  
and how will you enact this command?

Amen.