

Message Manuscript - © 2025 Josh Lunde-Whitler

October 19th, 2025 - Main Street Congregational Church

(Note: This manuscript is a "living document"! It may differ substantially at times from what is shared aloud during the worship service. There may also be typos, or written in a way that makes more sense for oration than for reading. Feel free to share all or portions of this text, but please include a citation.)

Passage: Jeremiah 31:31-34 (Year C, Proper 24)

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt--a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. 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.

Preparing for the Journey: Compassion

I. Will We Ever Learn?

In one way or another, we can relate with our stuffie friend . Whether you were a parent yourself encountering moments of stubbornness; Whether you had moments of stubbornness yourself growing up... or even later on, you set goals or resolutions, that were difficult to keep – We have all struggled to some degree with motivation. And yet we want to learn, or we want others or our children to learn, and so we dangle rewards. Or, for better or for worse, we threaten consequences. And when these don't work, we might be tempted to throw our hands up and wonder, "Will I ever learn? Will they ever learn?"

Reading the words of the prophet Jeremiah, we might imagine if God wondered if the kingdom of Judah would ever learn. Long ago, God made promises to Moses and the Israelite people: "I will be your God, and you will be my people." I got you. Now, that means you need to go about being in community with me and with each other in a whole new way, so let me lay it all out for you (Hebrew Scriptures: Torah, 1st 5 books). Here's how you take care of each other. Here's how you deal with indiscretions and crimes, and how people can be restored to community. Here's how you show your love to me and to each other. Here's how you make sure injustices and inequalities don't become generational, permanent. A literal manual on how to live (which might not completely make sense to us today, but in their world it was a monumental civic innovation).

And again and again, the people blow it. Israel divides into two kingdoms, the north completely blows it, and gets conquered by Assyria. The south, known as Judah, is only slightly better, until it's on the brink of collapse and threatened by another conquering army. Surely after seeing what happened to the North, they would get their act together? Yeah, nope. In the verse, "They Broke the covenant, although I was their husband," you can hear the pain in using this imagery. Almost a betrayal! You can nearly hear God say, "Will they ever learn?"

Learning right from wrong, and even learning how to be in community and to instill values of unselfishness, willingness to share, integrity, etc., these things can be nurtured in us. Doling out rewards and consequences to ourselves, or to others, can help us in the short term, and maybe eventually in the long term as well. But the problem is, if those values never actually take root in our hearts and grow on their own, it probably won't be enough.

II. Love inspires change.

If you ever read or watched *Les Miserables*, you'll remember Jean Valjean being branded as a thief as a child, just for trying to survive – After years of suffering one cruelty after another in prison, he was set free, but was still not really free, as he was forever branded a criminal, a stigma that prevented him from ever securing honest work ((a story all too familiar in our own legal system.) And so he resorts to stealing again, to be the criminal that he had been branded as. We might look at Jean and wonder "Will he ever learn?" — (Or perhaps we might look at "Justice systems" that create no-win situations for people, that use power and cruelty to try to enforce the law – and wonder, will they ever learn?)

So Jean relies on the kindness of the bishop to allow him to stay the night. Jean responds by taking the Bishop's silver and skipping town. When he is promptly caught he is returned by the authorities to the Bishop, to verify the outlandish story Jean tells, that those are his, the Bishop gave them to him. To the police's astonishment, the bishop confirms the story. Yes, I gave it to him. In fact he left so quickly that he forgot to take these silver candlesticks too.

Jean up to that point had known the law, knew about consequences. Here for the first time he encounters love, compassion, and it changes him, with a ripple effect that impacts the entire trajectory of his life. And while the full process takes time and patience, and is worked out through new relationships and goals throughout his new life, this was the moment when love began to work its way into his heart, and etch into it.

The Law being written on our hearts might be hard to get our heads around, until you remember Jesus' teachings, hundreds of years later – that the whole of the law and prophets can be summarized by LOVE. Love God with your whole heart. Love your neighbors, as yourselves. The law guides, instructs, teaches... but love itself is the fire for transformation, the most powerful motivator for lasting change, and in Jeremiah, God dreams of a day where love will be the thing that finally creates the community of God, the beloved and compassionate community.

Perhaps take a moment now to think of a time in your life, when compassion impacted you, that you never forgot and which inspired change?

III. Love at the Center.

As we continue to think about what we need for the journey we're on, as a church in a time of transition, and also, a people who live in this time, in this country, we will need our holy memories of where we've been, we'll need a spirit of gratitude, i.e., to see God's presence throughout our lives and in all the ways we're connected to each other — And, we'll need a hearty helping of compassion, for ourselves, for those around us, for our neighbors, for those who feel unsafe, maybe also for those for whom it's difficult to show compassion.

Like with our friend here, it takes practice and patience, for love to be written onto our hearts. Not passively waiting, mind you, compassion only starts with a feeling (like empathy), but it is nurtured through our actions, our care for others. Our standing for others, our raising money for others, our disrupting the status quo for others. I loved sitting down with Beth, and Dee, and many others this and last week, learning about the ways this "beloved-community-in-process" has prioritized compassion – to those in our fold, and also those who have sought safety and sanctuary. And in a world where laws, policies, and institutions fruitlessly try to impose cruel consequences in order to remake the world in the way they want, I hope and pray we as a community continue to prioritize compassionate action, that maybe, just maybe, can create ripple effects of change beyond what we can see.

How do we keep nurturing that compassion?

Well things like prayer can help. Worship. Meditation or study. Of course volunteering and getting involved in something you care about is the best way, and maybe you even could use a little reward system to help motivate yourself to participate or to practice compassion when you're not feeling up to it.

But the idea of the law, rooted in compassion, being written on our hearts, I think asks us to start a little deeper. And as we do, we find that while we can and should nurture and practice compassion, as we begin to draw nearer to God's heart and God's dream for the world, we discover something pretty amazing.

You see, various spiritual traditions, as well as contemporary psychological approaches like positive intelligence and internal family systems, all speak about the heart, the self, having an innate capacity to love. Meister Eckhart, medieval Christian mystic, said that we each have a divine spark of love that is actually at the center of our personhood, our identity. From the moment we're born we seek connection, we cling to love, and we respond to love shown to us, by offering it back in the ways we know how, and so in a very real way we are shaped by love. (And even if we didn't experience perfect love growing up or have struggled at times to feel connected, we still know it when we see it, our hearts haven't forgotten.)

So if this is true... That the law being written on our hearts is not so much the product of writing something brand new.... It's more a tracing-out, of words of love that were already there. A clearing of the clutter that clouds our self-perspective or our ability to engage our deepest part of ourselves.... And a re-discovering of the love that never lets us go — of who, and whose, we truly are, and to whom we belong.

Regardless of how that idea strikes you, I'd like to invite us to reflect some more:

Do you sense love at your center in any way? What do you think might hinder your ability at times to access that center? (We all have things!)

How might reflecting on this center from time to time help inspire a deeper motivation for compassion for others?

Reading

Our reading from our Sacred Story this morning comes from the prophet Jeremiah, chapter 31, verses 31 through 34:

31:31 The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

31:32 It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt--a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD.

31:33 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.

31:34 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.

(Optional closing words): *May the Still-Speaking God refresh our hearts and minds as we reflect on these ancient words together. Amen.*

Welcome

a. Welcome/Announcements

- i. (welcome, newcomers, online: take a breath, breathe in God that clears way to know God, know ourselves, know each other)*

Welcome! We're so glad you're here! Josh, one of the ministers, the interim pastor
Special welcome to any newcomers!

And also I've been forgetting, but want to say hello, welcome to those watching on FB! –
Please leave any reflections, prayer requests, there.

It is the 19th Sunday after Pentecost in the Christian calendar; it's the Best time of the
year in New England (Pumpkin season!), You have made it here this morning, taking time
out of your precious weekend hours to tend to your heart and spirit, to draw near to the
Spirit of God as she surrounds and imbues this family.

(pause)

Take a moment to look around... (if you make eye contact, share peace)

No matter who you are, where from, where in your faith journey....

No matter how you look or what your background is, how you identify yourself to others
or what others have labeled you....

No matter who you love, what you've been through,

> if you feel tired or broken, that is enough for God.

> God loves taking broken and making beautiful

ii. Announcements:

- New here? Please fill out a card to introduce yourself to the deacons and lay ministry team here.
- Reflection cards!
- Donations for toilet paper - Newbury FP
- Please help with Pumpkins! > signup link on email.
- Tuesday night class: podcast study on experiencing Jesus - The Way of Love. (Arlyn/Connie)
- Standout on the 25th — Concert on 10/26 — Holiday Fair! 11/8. >> make cookies
- Would love to meet/connect during open hours at Ovedia, see bulletin! If can't get away, please text or email me and we'll set something up.
- Prayer time? Start Nov 12

Call to Worship/*Hymn

One: We gather together, seeking your Flame that goes before us.

Many: Grant us wisdom, peace, and hope for the journey ahead.

One: You are always with us, in our very breath; we feel your presence with every heartbeat.

Many: Give us the courage to endure, and to find strength in each other.

One: We are yours, yet but a small part of your handiwork.

Many: Help us discover the truth of your Love etched into our hearts.

Litany/LP

One: Earth-and-Heavens-Maker, our hearts bend to you like trees in the storm, knowing everything finds its origins and evolution in you.

Many: You never tire of working in us, or your world; you never give up! Continue to shape and mold us, marking us with Love and Hope.

One: Guide and Guardian, Shade from the sun's heat, we thank you for never leaving our side, through thick and thin.

Many: As we cross into uncharted territories, steady our worries, and remind us to trust in you, who have brought us this far.

One: Life-Keeper, you nourish us with your Life and Love, even as we are tempted by the empty calories of workaholism, consumption, isolation, recalcitrance, and demonization.

Many: Help us to nurture our minds and spirits wisely, that we might be swifter to listen, slower to anger, and bolder in compassion.

One: God-in-Community, We open ourselves up to your grace, remembering to pray in the manner that Jesus taught us:.....

Story for All

- > *Stuffie>>>> tell you story about them.*
 - > ***brush teeth, didn't want to!*** Tried a new trick: Make it fun!
 - > ***Didn't want to go to school.*** Try another trick: Think about the good stuff!
 - > ***Kid being mean to another kid at school.*** Was scared to help. (But you want to?) > Remember that voice is God's voice, let it give you strength. And do your best. Takes practice.
- Q > ***Anyone have a trick for doing hard things?***
 - > ***What are some ways you LIKE to show love to others?***
 - >> Make list?
- ***Share idea > When we share in God's love, God writes love on our hearts! >>***
Deep down we want to show care and love for others.
- ***Special assignment:*** > Draw/color the ways you like to show love on these hearts and show to me after.

(music)

Prayer/*Hymn

Before narrating the parable, Luke interprets it: "It is necessary to pray always and not to despair." Maintaining hope (18:1) responds to the adversity predicted in 17:22–37 (Includes hope for justice!) – [R. Brawley](#)

- i. *Joys: Include praises from notes.*
- ii. *Concerns:*
 - i. Vertical vs. horizontal morality as a divide in church, affecting our world.
- iii. *World:*

Offering

*Hymn/*Benediction