

Heart-Writing
John 12:20-36 / Jeremiah 31:31-33
Colebrook Congregational Church
March 22, 2015

The Old Testament lectionary selection for this week is my favorite from the Prophets, maybe the whole Old Testament. I love the imagery of verse 32, and how that imagery fits with the theology of love of Jonathan Edwards.

Jeremiah is one of the three Major Prophets of the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, the calling a prophet major or minor was essentially determined by how long the scroll of their prophecies is. So, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekial fill up a scroll each, while the rest fill up one scroll all together. Jeremiah is the most emotional of the prophets, in my opinion. His preachings are full of begging and pleading with last two kings of Judah to avoid national destruction by the Babylonians. They did not listen to him. Twice, the Babylonians defeated the Kingdom of Judah. Twice, the Babylonians took a portion of the population away into captivity. It describes how Jeremiah watched the Babylonians take Jerusalem and destroy the Temple in 587 BC.

The selection from Jeremiah, comes from a very lengthy chapter that is about a happier subject. Jeremiah is prophesizing about the joyful return of the Exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem. He is talking about a new covenant with God where we will innately know the Law, and Jesus tells us that you can sum up all the Law and Prophets with “Love God with all your heart, mind, and soul; and Love your Neighbor as yourself;” therefore, we will innately treat each other with love. This is the central ideal of Jonathan Edward's theology of Love and disinterested benevolence, that we will reach this point in our interpersonal relationships. Divine Love at the center of everything.

The Gospel lectionary selection comes from the middle of a chapter where Jesus is preparing to enter Jerusalem for his final Passover observance before his arrest and crucifixion. In this chapter, he is also arguing with the Pharisees and thwarting their plots, he speaks of his death, and prophecized about God and belief.

The verse prior to the start of our selection is an exclamation by the

Pharisees, that the world has gone after Jesus, and with the next verse there is mention of two Greeks. To the Israelites, the Greeks represented the rest of the world. Through the conquests of Alexander of Great, the universal language at this point was Greek...even among the Romans! And these two Greeks approached the two disciples with Greek names, Philip and Andrew, to inquire about Jesus.

The implication here is that Jesus' ministry is now expanding beyond just the local and the Jewish settings into a more worldly one. It's kinda like when a group plans an event. First it is discussed and planned out by the group members, and it's not ready to be announced immediately, so it is kept among the group. When they are ready for everyone to know, they make posters to hang up, send out a press release, make announcements, and send out emails. Greeks at that time had a reputation for being inquisitive and gossipy, for lack of a better word. They traveled around as much as possible, experiencing and witnessing things, then writing or sharing these experiences with others. So, by including these Greeks, outsiders or foreigners by definition, the announcement of the Good News is becoming a lot more public.

Jesus speaks to the Greek visitors, telling them that the time has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. This mention of glorification within a few days of his crucifixion, is obviously a reference to that event in retrospect. By this connection, the crucifixion being considered a glorification, means that death, his death, is the condition for rising again in triumph. He illustrates this to them, through a farming metaphor. You have a grain of wheat. You can eat it, combine it with more, grind it down and eat bread...or you can plant it, and harvest a lot more wheat grains! Plant the grain, it becomes a seed, then it germinates, and it stops being a seed...it "dies" as Jesus puts it, then it becomes a stalk with a bounty of more grains! So, that single grain is "glorified" by "dying" and coming back in triumph, with more grains; just as Jesus dies at the crucifixion and then returns in triumph, having saved us all.

Jesus then gives them a life lesson that he repeats in every gospel. Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life will keep it for eternity. Jesus is talking about sacrifice being necessary for salvation and selfishness is spiritual stagnation. It is another way of saying how the meek

will inherit the earth. It is also one of reasons for giving something up for Lent. I do not believe that this is a prohibition of having fun or enjoying life, because there is plenty of stories in the Gospels that describe Jesus being social, and according to some, being funny as well. I think what Jesus means by loving their life is more in the sense of being selfish. Even little things. Cutting in line, taking advantage of someone else's inattention, cutting someone off on the road, crossing without looking both ways, or not listening when someone is sharing something with us. Many are unintentional, but look at it from the other direction, and see how much better it is to make sure that the other person has their turn, is looked after, or feels that they are listening to, and maybe even appreciated. These are the sort of simple ways that Jesus' call for his followers to sacrifice, can be accomplished.

Speaking of Sacrifices, this is the fifth Sunday of Lent, the last observing Lent by itself, as next Sunday is Palm Sunday. For those who observed Lent by giving something up, reflect upon that so far. In light of this Sunday's selection, ask yourself, has your sacrifice led to something greater?

Theresa told me how one year she gave up caffeine for Lent. She used to need it every morning and was dependent on it for getting things done and for even her mood. The sacrifice was a difficult one for her, but after the six weeks, she found that not only did she no longer need the caffeine, she was better off without it. She slept better, woke feeling better, and her mood was better all around. She made a sacrifice and it has led to something greater.

Both of the lectionary selections look towards a bright new future. Jeremiah's prophesy is looking toward the day where we will innately love our neighbors, where Jonathan Edwards posits that in doing so, we sacrifice our own selfishness in the service of others, and where Jesus teaches us that our sacrifices of selfishness, will lead to something greater. They all look forward to a day, a time when the Golden Rule, the Greatest Commandment, Love, is the order of the day. Where love is written on our hearts.

Amen.

Prayers of the People

[PAUSE]

In the days before his passion, Jesus offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears, as we now pray for those who suffer, those who are in need, and those who seek reconciliation. We offer prayers for all those who are ill, for those who are shut it, for the lonely, for our caregivers and defenders. We offer thanks for the blessings of our life. We pray that you help those who risk their lives to save others, to serve their communities, and to help preserve the artifacts of history. We pray for an end to conflict in the world, where all sides can reach for peace.

We especially pray for:

God of compassion, you know our faults and yet you promised to forgive. Keep us in your presence and give us your wisdom. Open our hearts to gladness, call dry bones to dance, and restore to us the joy of your salvation. Amen.