

Nov. 8, 2015
The Rev. Dr. Tom Blair

The Heart of the Matter

Jeremiah 31:31-34
Second Presbyterian Church, Baltimore

*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.*

Here is a question you don't hear every day... Where does your Peace come from? What is it that brings you comfort, assurance, that allows you to sleep at night, secure in confidence and good hope, for your soul and the welfare of the world?

That's a big question, isn't it?

If you are looking for answers to that question, you've come to the right place.

Today's sermon is the last of our "Putting Second First" series, titled

"The Heart of the Matter." Our scripture lesson comes from the book of Jeremiah, which might have you scratching your head, that is, until you get to know Jeremiah. When you might think "The Heart of the Matter"- the core of the Bible's message of God's love for us, demonstrated most clearly in Jesus, would be found in our savior's words, actions, in his death & resurrection, for our purposes this morning, these ancient words of Jeremiah's promise will do just fine.

Seven centuries before Christ Jeremiah promised words of hope against a backdrop of conflict, political disaster and deep human suffering. Jeremiah has been described as a God-intoxicated person of conscience, decent and brave, uncompromising in his passion for justice and desire for religion to be liberating and fair. Unlike some other Biblical figures, Jeremiah is an accessible, human figure we can relate to, when we try.

The section of the book of Jeremiah that our brief reading comes from is a literary unit called the 'The Book of Comfort'. This is helpful to know, because it is one of the most



important passages in all of Hebrew Scripture. This is the first time a new covenant is announced to God's people.

Throughout Israel's history covenants were established to seal the ongoing relationship of God with humanity. These weren't contracts in the modern sense, two parties willfully coming to a negotiated agreement. Ancient contracts were unilateral, one party (God) is much more powerful than the other (people), setting the terms by which the two parties would relate. This kind of covenant didn't require the less powerful partner's consent or willingness; there was no room for negotiation. Moses came down from the mountain with words inscribed by God on two tablets with new ways for the Israelites to relate to God and one another after their escape from slavery in Egypt, and it was a done deal.

In the new covenant, Jeremiah announces that God will place the divine law into the hearts of humanity; there will be a new relationship, as natural as a child to a parent, free and positive. Just as it's natural to do things to please your parent, so it also will be between God and God's people. Although the content of the covenant is not explained in detail, its delivery system is. Rather than being written on large stone tablets, these words will be inscribed within human hearts; incarnate in human flesh and blood.

If you were to ask the prophet Jeremiah 'Where does your Peace come from?', he might say, 'from the Lord of Heaven and Earth, the God of Israel, the Lord of all the nations, the God of all peoples.'

The Heart of the Matter for Jeremiah is God's everlasting hope for our welfare and God's constant love for us, and our returning that love, in our lives of worship, service and praise.

The Heart of the Matter, in a word, is healthy stewardship. There is necessary give and take, an ongoing relationship of deepening trust, assurance and confidence that first and always comes from God, wells up in us as gratitude, and is returned back in kind to God's children as we are given the gifts to respond.

There are three news items of late that relate to all of this, and they relate to each other in terms of this larger theme, when you think about it hard enough: "Where does your peace come from?"

Two of the three have answers that are sorely lacking.

The first piece comes from a well publicized Pew Research Center Study that shows that the percentage of Americans who say they believe in God, pray daily and attend church regularly is declining. This is nothing new. One item stands out in the study. The religiously

unaffiliated, the self-described ‘nones’ (not n-u-n-s, but n-o-n-e-s), now account for 23% of the adult population, up 6% from 2005. While the faith of those still who attend church remains strong, those ‘spiritual but not religious’ consider their faith to be drawn from ‘nothing in particular’; a smorgasbord of locations to draw from: earth, sky, nature, adventure; but no one single place to identify the Source, the well, the locus of God’s imprint, the signature of the Creator’s hand on the human heart. Without a community of support, encouragement and fellowship; with no common story to be shared, I have to wonder about the rootlessness of these folks. I’m sad that, for whatever collection of reasons, more people don’t share the support and joy of what it means to be part of a faithful fellowship. They literally don’t know what they are missing.

The second news item may have been harder to find (but I tend to look for these things, in between the 24 hour news cycle.)

Headlined **“Something startling is happening to middle-aged white Americans,”** it caught my eye. Unlike every other age group or racial or ethnic group, death rates in this group, (really, working class, middle-aged white Americans...) have been rising, not falling. Reported last week by two Princeton economists, they concluded that rising annual death rates among this group are being driven not by the big killers like heart disease and diabetes but by an epidemic of suicides and substance abuse; alcoholic liver disease and overdoses of heroin and prescription drugs. “It is difficult to find modern settings with survival losses of this magnitude,” is a quotable quote from this study. Here’s another: “This is a vivid indication that something is awry in these American households.” That’s an understatement if I’ve ever heard one.

To the question, “Where does your peace come from?” I’ll offer this anecdote as an answer. A friend of mine, a colleague at another Presbyterian Church not too far from here, had a phone call, asking if he could do a funeral for a non-member. “Sure” he said. As the conversation continued and he tried to learn more about the recently departed, what he learned of note was that the biggest thing, the most important last request that this person had about his funeral service was that “Stairway to Heaven” by Led Zeppelin be played, and very loud. The deceased thought that this song was in some way his ticket to life eternal. If that’s not a statement about modern society, then I don’t know what is. HmMMM... (Maybe Robert Plant – the lead singer, holds the keys to the kingdom, but I doubt it.)

This final news piece is a little dated, but a lot more reassuring. It’s called the “Roseto

Effect.” Roseto is a small Pennsylvania town, about 20 miles south of my hometown, and there was a study done there in the 1960’s that has reemerged of late.

It seems that the incidence of heart disease was significantly lower in Roseto than in its neighbor town of Bangor. This set in motion some remarkable research. Roseto was a town of 1,600 Italian-Americans. Every home in town had three generations living in it and the sense of community was very tight. They were mostly row homes, built for the slate miners who settled there.

Teams of researchers tried to determine why the rate of heart attack was so much lower than nearby Bangor. Was it diet? No, Rosetans ate a typical American diet. Was it genes? No. Other Italian communities had heart attack rates similar to the national average. Was it healthy habits? No. Rosetans smoked as much as people in Bangor, exercised as little as people there too, and met the national average for obesity and high blood pressure.

Was it the physical environment? No, there was no significant difference between Roseto and neighboring towns. Was it a short-term statistical anomaly? No, the trend held up through the years.

In the end health officials tracked the secret to good health in Roseto : it was a close sense of community, with strong bonds of family, friendship and connectivity. The head of the research team wrote in his report: “In terms of preventing heart disease, it’s just possible that morale is more important than jogging or not eating butter.”

Interestingly, the initial research team predicted that the health benefits would diminish as successive generations ‘Americanised’ and lost their tight knit sense of community. A fifty-year study found their prediction to be accurate.

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Connecting the dots between these brief case studies and Jeremiahs’ promise isn’t too hard. Isolation isn’t good. Community is better. Knowing that God in Christ is real, and that God’s love is written on our hearts give me more assurance than I can ever create on my own.

To see life with the heart of Jeremiah, aware of God’s everlasting love for us now and always, is the greatest gift we can ever receive; bar none.

There is opportunity for us, as a church, to reach out to those lonely, otherwise preoccupied, or on a separate journey... (The open seats around us are an invitation for us to share a seat with someone else....someone who you might know well...)

There is also a deep reason for us to be thankful for the fellowship we have here, called to

reach out to those with whom we can share our friendship, all rooted in God's love, as Jeremiah has rightly claimed is written on our hearts, with God as the author, the Holy Spirit the writing instrument the and the name Jesus Christ, our Lord on each of our hearts.

“Where does your peace come from?”

If you want to help pass along, this knowledge, joy and assurance along, then join me, and Put Second First. Amen.