**Jeremiah 31:27-34**

27The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals. 28And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the Lord. 29In those days they shall no longer say: “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” 30But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge. 31The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. 32It 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. 33But 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. 34No 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.

**2 Timothy 3:14-17** 14But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, 15and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 16All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

**Luke 18:1-8** 18Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. 2He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. 3In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ 4For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, 5yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’” 6And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. 7And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? 8I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

“Written on Our Hearts”

The Rev. Lisa J. Durkee

October 16, 2022

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

(Singing) “Write these words in our hearts, we beseech thee, Oh Lord.” This was a response to scripture that we sang every week in the church I grew up in; it is probably in the hymnal I received when I graduated from Sunday School into our confirmation class. I kind of wonder and have been thinking this week a lot about what sorts of words we have written in our hearts these days. Thinking of the expression, “to know it by heart,” I think of my students—I could maybe say, “my poor students,” over the years, whom I made commit to memory passages from scripture and from Shakespeare. Maybe some of you had to remember passages of scripture in Sunday School. How about poems or Shakespeare in school? – even more, interestingly. There was also a tradition where I taught for a number of years, that students in the eleventh grade would have to memorize the first eighteen lines of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. I was reminded of this recently with our neighbor and friend Rob Bauer. For some reason, out of the blue, he began reciting them and I joined in, to his great surprise. Add to my students’ pain that we studied it in the original Middle English. Add to the particular pain of an especially bright student of mine that he was in his first semester of school in the U.S., having come from Hong Kong. Now in his early 40s, Eric and I continue to be in touch, and his family and mine have spent memorable time together both here and in Hong Kong. Still, though, I don’t think he forgives my having made him pronounce “Whan that April with his showres soote . . .” I know it still, and chimed in, because I said it with two and sometimes three classes every year for six years when I taught British Literature. I wonder what are the things we know by heart.

I am curious to know what we all have committed to memory. If we were to add up the lines of the words we have learned “by heart,” I am guessing that it would lean toward the several hundreds of thousands. How many of these, though, are scriptural, I asked myself? I have to admit that for me, having taught literature for nearly fifteen years, I know a lot more Shakespeare from memory, by heart, than I think I do scripture, at least verbatim. There was a way that I lived and breathed literature that almost astonishes me now. I wonder today what it is that we all live and breathe about our faith, that our understanding of and relationship with God becomes “written on our hearts.” To what sorts of words, to what kinds of understanding are we committed?

While I was away last week on retreat with my good friend from seminary, we remembered together the nervous weeks we spent before our ordination services, mine fifteen years ago this week and her *ordiversary,* as we like to call it, next month. My friend is a comedian, and on the eve of *her* ordination we went to see a comedy club. We went out for dinner the night before mine, and she suggested that I might celebrate my ordination by getting a tattoo. Yes, celebrate my ordination by getting a tattoo, and in case you’re wondering, I didn’t. I’m sure I must have told her what I have continued to tell people for the better part of forty years, that there is no image, nor any word to which I could commit for a lifetime. Yet, I know people with tattoos all over them—multi-colored, ornate, simple, witty, rude—even profane, and even some with scripture. Even my older daughter has a couple of tattoos. She asked for my blessing, though not permission, for her first. I have also seen tattoos on top of tattoos—names of former lovers delicately erased in the petals of a rose, or more emphatically crossed out with what could be called modern art. “Body art,” as tattoos are now called, is something that more and more people kind of collect as time goes by. In reading today’s scripture, I wonder what images, what words we allow to get *past* our skin. In thinking about the reading from Jeremiah, what lessons have we learned so well that we will not even need to teach them anymore? (Singing) Write these words in our hearts, we beseech thee, Oh Lord.

Having admitted that I have paid close attention to Shakespeare, I will share one thought that has stuck with me. As a writer, I have clung onto one of his sonnets, in which he wants to memorialize his love. He knew that the written word sometimes can last longer than more physical structures. “Not marble nor the gilded monuments of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme,” he wrote. This was good news to his lady love, I imagine. I have to tell you, though, that the good news we read in the Bible gives me greater joy. If we think only about today’s lessons, there is a great deal to give us hope, maybe even inclining us to sing. There are words in today’s lessons that I want to hang onto, because while there may be images and ideas that stick around for a long time, there is a lot in our lives that steadily changes. There are plenty of circumstances that can bring us down; plenty of incidents that can divert us from where we thought we wanted to go; there are plenty of opportunities we miss and relationships we bungle. Maybe these kinds of occasions seem to be the constant we can most count on.

But that isn’t God talking; those aren’t God’s words. It may be that this kind of hopelessness is the myth that false teachers bring (in a little further reading from 2nd Timothy that Jeannie shared with us), because what we read in scripture is that our God, our constant guide, our fortress and our strength has promised something altogether different. The lesson I hear in our scripture today, the one that I hope will get under your skin; that will indeed be written on your hearts is this: God has given us a new covenant; God will forgive us our wrongs; God will not remember our sins. And this is a matter of grace. If there is one word that I hope we can carry with us throughout our days it is Grace. Will you say it with me? Grace. We can say it like a prayer, remembering that God gives it to us: Grace. We can shout it out in our thanks for receiving it, Grace! We can sing it when we know it can change us, and call it amazing, “Grace.” And there is nothing we have done or can do to deserve it.

But that’s o.k. There is a new covenant between God and us, and this is a covenant of grace. God loved us so much that he gave us his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Jesus will not perish, but will have eternal life. Grace. And it is to this loving God that we send our prayers of thanks, of praise, of confession and sometimes of beseeching petition. It is this kind of prayer that Jesus talks about in the parable about the judge and the widow. Although this is a story that can remind us how important it is to pray, and to pray without ceasing, as Paul puts it, you may not be surprised to learn that I also think it is a story about grace. Because, you see, God is not at all like the unjust judge who finally gives in to the widow’s request. If even an unjust judge eventually will grant justice in the face of persistent pleading, says Jesus, how much more quickly will God grant justice to those who ask for it? Remember that this is the God who forgives us even when we sin. That is the promise we heard from Jeremiah, and that we see God make good on through Jesus’ life, death and resurrection.

Our response to this kind of justice—a justice that returns sin with forgiveness—is, I believe, where Jesus leads us in the close of today’s lesson. “And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” We may sometimes find it difficult to get at the lessons of the Gospels, but in this instance, we only have to look at the rest of the story to find out what God wants us to do. This is a story about God’s gracious justice, and it is also a story about the need for persistent prayer. Not because it is through our persistence that God listens to us, but because through our persistence we are changed. What does it take to commit God’s word to memory? Persistence. What does it take to create a prayer life? Persistence. What does it take to create the kind of relationship with God that becomes a lesson we no longer have to teach? Persistence. We are meant to pray persistently not because we need God to change and be more just. We are meant to pray persistently because *we* need to change in order for there to be justice. God is the constant giver of life and of the possibility for justice and for joy. We are God’s chosen people, graced by the gift of Jesus who does not remember our sins. May we live out our faith through our justice and our prayers, which by grace may be written on our hearts. Amen