

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 - 4:5

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.

4In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: ²proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. ³For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, ⁴and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. ⁵As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

“Written on Our Hearts”
The Rev. Lisa J. Durkee
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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. I kind of wonder 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 Shakespeare. 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*. Add to their 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. At forty-one now, Eric continues to correspond with me, and even spent Thanksgiving with my family years ago. Still, though, I don’t think he forgives my having made him pronounce “Whan that April with his showres soote . . .”

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 have to admit that for me, having taught literature for nearly fifteen years, I know a lot more Shakespeare than I think I do the Bible. There was a way that I lived and breathed literature that almost astonishes me now. I wonder today what it is that we leave 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? I know people with tattoos all over them—multi-colored, ornate, simple, witty, rude—even profane, and even

some with scripture. 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 enter into as time goes by. On the eve of my ordination, a dear clergy friend of mine suggested that I might celebrate by getting a tattoo. Yes, celebrate my ordination by getting a tattoo. I gave my standard response, one I have offered for the better part of forty years, that there is no image, nor any word to which I could commit for a lifetime on my skin. 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. I mentioned it in conversation with David Jolly after our last gathering around the issue of white privilege.

Shakespeare 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 and perhaps even to incline 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, 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, and will forgive us our wrongs, and 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. I have had conversations only in passing so far with some of you, and it is more than a couple of them in which you have shared that you are not exactly sure what to think of prayer, and of praying. I have thought a lot about what *I*, in fact think about prayer and about praying. I remember the story that Jesus tells in parable about a widow who implores a judge to save her; to judge against her adversary. The story goes that though the judge does not fear God, he eventually gives in because she has been so consistent, so constant in her petitions. 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. We need to pray without ceasing so that we really do become people who sow peace, love, pardon, faith, hope, light and joy. 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 a savior 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.

Let us pray: Write these words on our hearts, we beseech thee, O God. Amen.