

Renewed Commitments, a sermon in response to Jeremiah 31:31-34 and John 12:20-33 by Rev. Scot McCachren for Hilltop Church, Mendham, NJ, March 17, 2024.

[If there were NO kids for the Children’s Message]: I’m always disappointed on days like today when there are no children here to come up for the Time with Children. It’s always my favorite part of the service...

[If there WERE kids for the Children’s Message]: Sundays like today, when we have children here in worship with us, are so much more enjoyable, aren’t they? The Time with Children is my favorite part of the service...

I also love it when they volunteer to carry in the light of Christ – and when they go to our Sunday School to learn about Jesus and the Bible. And then, when they get older, they can start helping us to lead worship – like Megan did today with her beautiful rendition of Psalm 121. They start going on mission trips and volunteering in the community. It’s always very fulfilling to see children growing, – see them coming into their own – and **developing their own hearts for God**. That’s one of the things we talk about frequently in the confirmation class – to find out for yourself what **you** believe, what **your** priorities will be – which may or may **not** be what someone else has been telling you that you **should** believe. +++ Seeing young people come into their own is a beautiful thing, isn’t it? +++ I think the old saying is true: When children are 5, they think their parents know **everything**, – then when they are 15 they think their parents know **nothing** (plus their parents are **SO** uncool and just don’t “get it”). – At 25, they’ve started to realize that maybe – just maybe – their parents might have been smarter than they thought. Soon, many have children of their own – who, of course, will have the same impressions about **them**. +++ Then, by the time we turn **35**, we often want to be **like** our parents, we wonder how **they** would handle situations that arise, and we ask for their **advice**. +++ ... +++

It’s interesting that as we come into our own as individuals, we often realize that we’ve made **our own Renewed Commitments** to the same habits and values that our parents got so frustrated trying to teach us from the **start**. – Somehow, it’s **living in us – it’s a part of us...** No one has to **remind** us anymore. – We just **know**. – **It’s written on our hearts**... +++ Maybe one day you had a moment like that, when you realized it. You realize, **we’re** the ones now who vote because we know it’s important – **we’re** the ones who teach Sunday School or serve on committees, or as church officers – **we’re** the ones trying to teach a **new** generation... +++ And so it goes. +++ +++ Really, despite the fact we rebel when we are younger – I think we start internalizing the values of our parents and other role models even before we are aware we are doing it... +++ For several years in the past, I had a chance to participate in a high school’s mock interview program with their juniors – preparing them for their upcoming interviews with colleges and employers. One question I asked every student I talked to, “If you had to identify one role model in your life – one person you want to be like – who would it be?” ... They didn’t have to think long. Invariably, they would answer, “My mother” or “My father,” or occasionally, “My teacher.” ... And usually, even though it *seemed* like an easy and obvious answer to them – they **still** looked a little surprised to hear themselves saying it – like they hadn’t realized it before. +++ +++ But somehow, I think the influence of our **earliest and best** role models seeps into our hearts... +++ It becomes mixed into our DNA. +++ +++ Sure, we **all** rebel at some point..., we **all** push away from authority..., we **all** want to do things our own way..., we **all** make mistakes..., +++ we **all** wander +++ ... +++ we **all** sin. +++ +++ BUT, even in the midst of all that, – We **still** respond to love more than judgment... We **still** respond to forgiveness more than to punishment... When we receive **love and forgiveness**, it grows in us. It renews us – it *remains*... **written on our hearts** – +++ and it makes us who we are.

+++++

The great prophet Jeremiah sees Israel as that wayward child with growing pains: – pushing away – complaining – wanting to do things their own way – and finally completely breaking the covenant by making idols and worshipping the pagan gods of Canaan. +++ +++ And God, as the loving parent, is desperately looking for new ways to *connect* with this beloved child who has strayed so far: *if the covenant isn’t working for them, maybe some new kind of covenant is needed*. +++ ... ||| ... +++ In many ways, this section of Jeremiah is like an oasis in a desert of suffering. The opening chapters find both the prophet **and God** pleading with Israel to repent +++ and warning of pending destruction if they do not. But like a headstrong child who thinks they know best; Israel will not turn from its sin. In chapter after chapter, Jeremiah mourns for what his people will soon endure –

and finally it happens – Israel is conquered by Babylon and the People of God are taken away in exile. Jerusalem is gutted – the Temple is destroyed. It seems that all hope is lost. +++ +++ **BUT NOW** – almost immediately after the fall of Jerusalem – God offers hope – and provides a vision for the future – after the exile. **A glimpse of something new on the horizon.** +++ :: +++ “**You are my children –... If you can’t work with a covenant like the one your ancestors had – a covenant based on law and punishment – **then we’ll try something new.** – There will be a New Covenant based on **love and forgiveness.**” +++ +++ A time will come – God promises through the prophet – that **in the midst of your sin** – your faults will be met by **grace** – your faults with **eternal love** – your sins will be met with **forgiveness.** +++ Instead of a static law, written on stone tablets, this **new** covenant will **live in you** – it will be **a part of you...** no one will have to remind you anymore. You will **Renew your Commitment** because it will be **written on your heart** to do so. +++ As you grow and come into your **own** and develop your **own** heart for the Lord. – It will be part of who YOU are, – the person you grow to become... +++ +++ This kind of **forgiveness** – this kind of **grace** – it sets an example, doesn’t it? It makes us want to follow – it makes us want to grow up and be a part of it. Model it. **Live** it.**

+++++++ ++++++++ ++++++++ ++++++++

Here in Jeremiah, the Lord gives us a great example of righteous parenthood. Even after Israel’s repeated and often devastating sins, – the doors remain open, now and forever, for God’s People to renew their commitment to the Lord. – Not out of **fear.** – Not through **punishment.** – But because they are **loved.** – They are **forgiven.** – They are **redeemed.** +++ It’s remarkable... – Today – in this reading – God takes our **worldly** understanding of sin and punishment, – of power and control, and turns it upside down. +++ And I think, perhaps, this gives us one of the clearest glimpses of what the coming Messiah will offer. +++ +++ Because, you see, Jesus Christ **IS** that New Covenant, promised so long ago.

+++++++ ++++++++ ++++++++ ++++++++

When we catch up with Jesus in the 12th chapter of John, there is a lot happening all at the same time. Since the beginning of his ministry, Jesus has been clashing with the **Jewish** leaders and attracting more and more Jews to follow him. But now, a transition is taking place. We can tell by the tone and content of what Jesus is saying that the endgame is drawing near: “Now my soul is troubled,” Jesus says, “And what should I say — ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have **come** to this hour.” +++ +++ Now, as the **cross** draws ever closer – some **Greeks** show up at the festival – and they are drawn to Jesus as well. The promise of this New Covenant of love and forgiveness is ready to spread to the rest of the world – beyond Palestine – beyond Rome. +++ I think the Greeks’ very formal approach to Jesus shows how different he is than anything else they’ve ever seen before. – Did you notice the formality? – They ask for introductions. The Greeks approach Philip and ask to see Jesus. Philip takes the request to Andrew – and together, they tell Jesus. +++ But all that formality are trappings of **this world** – and Jesus immediately cuts right through it and talks to them directly. – Then when he calls to God, saying, “**Father, glorify your name,**”... the **voice of the Lord** responds from heaven to a whole new set of witnesses: “**I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.**” Some people thought they had heard thunder – others thought it had been an angel. +++ But if there had been any doubts that **something new** is happening here, – something **not from this world,** – those doubts are erased within moments of meeting Jesus... +++ ... And now the stage is set. All the pieces are in place. Here at the end, Jesus extends his ministry and his promise to the Gentile world... *And what is the first thing he tells them??* Jesus cuts right to the chase, explaining to these Greeks the topsy-turvy-last-shall-be-first-first-shall-be-last promise of God’s **New Covenant** – the same absurd message he’s been teaching the Jews from the beginning. He says, “Those who **love** their life **lose** it, and those who **hate** their life **in this world** will **keep** it for eternal life.” +++

This is what God had promised through Jeremiah so many generations ago. – Jesus rejects the old patterns of judgment and punishment. – He rejects the old values of **this world.** +++ And Christ invites **everyone,** – Jews and Gentiles alike, – to **open their hearts** and receive the gift of the New Covenant in his crucifixion and resurrection: “And I, when I **am lifted up** from the earth, **will draw ALL people to myself.**” +++ +++ Those Greeks respond to Christ because – despite having been immersed in the **old values** of this world their whole lives up until now, – they **still** respond to love, as we all do... They **still** respond to forgiveness... Jesus plants that seed and it will grow in them and renew them. Christ writes on their hearts that day +++ and changes them forever, **beginning with their hearts.** +++

+++++

In John – the contrast and tension between the values of “this world” and that of the divine is a key to the whole gospel – and it’s the point where the New Covenant calls to us. For those who can’t see past it, *THIS* world is the concrete reality of life. It is stuck in the **physical** while Christ calls us to the **spiritual – to the divine**. As Christ offers his eternal light, the persistent values of this world are a stumbling block for those who remain in **darkness**. ... *THIS* world **IS** stuck in **judgment and punishment**. It’s the language we speak. It’s the order we’ve imposed. *And so, it’s what we expect from our God*. ... But Christ offers **eternal life** to anyone who can beyond *this world* and believe in **him**. +++ It’s no accident that Jesus pronounces judgment on *this world* just as he arrives at the hour of his glorification – and just as the door is opened to these first Greeks to **step OUT of this world** into faithfulness: He says, “**Now** is the **judgment** of this world; now the **ruler** of this world (- meaning *Satan* -) will be **driven out**.” +++ +++ +++ As the earthly life of Jesus draws to its end, **the NEW Covenant – of love and forgiveness – of finding our lives by turning them over to Christ – has arrived** – and is **written on our hearts forever**.

+++ +++ +++ +++ +++ +++ +++

The Season of Lent is growing long. As Jesus’ triumphant arrival in Jerusalem lies just before us, Christ urgently calls us to *keep listening* to the voice of **God** in new ways – to *keep noticing* how the **Holy Spirit** shows up in our lives, new and fresh, – and to *keep reading* what **Christ** has written on our hearts. +++ Jesus calls us to **Renew our Commitment** to follow him. +++ Just like 2000 years ago, that means receiving the New Covenant in **our** hearts by abandoning **our own** idols of **THIS world** – idols like the **cult of violence**, answering violence with more violence, when God calls us to peace – like the **cult of greed and class**, finding ways to justify the growing disparity between the rich and the poor, when Christ calls us to share rather than hoard – and like the **cult of separation**, aligning ourselves with “*people like us*” and minimizing the needs and the pain of others – the cult of so-called Christian Nationalism... the sins of racism, religious intolerance, and bias based on sexuality and gender. +++ These things arise from *THIS WORLD*’s obsession with **judgment and punishment**. – They do not reflect Christ’s New Covenant of love and forgiveness. They do not reflect his grace.

+++++

Let us be those **children** again... growing into the values of our birthright – the values rejected for so long. Let us each come into our own with the Word of God – and grow our hearts for the Lord anew. **Let us set aside our rebellion** – our resistance – and **Renew our Commitment** to the gift that is Jesus Christ – God’s New Covenant – *living in us – a part of us*... So no one has to **remind** us anymore – we just know: – **The New Covenant – written on our hearts – by the hand of God**... +++

+++++ +++++ +++++ +

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.