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Hebrews 5:5-10

Jeremiah 31:31-34

WRITTEN ON OUR HEARTS

Think about the most powerful words you have ever uttered. For me, they have been words that bound me to another, that were vows I was promising to uphold. For better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part - marriage vows. Relying on God's grace, do you promise to nurture your child in the life and faith of the Christian community? With God's help, we do - baptismal vows. Among the actions that have great meaning for my life as a pastor officiating particular worship services is that I get to invite people to say among the most powerful words that they will likely say in their whole lives – words that are dynamic because they are from the heart and words, if we follow them, that will define our very lives. I have missed getting to elicit such commitments during a year of pandemic limited worship.

There are other powerful words that shape us. I have not ever been very good at memorizing long passages of scripture, of learning them by heart. But there are phrases from scripture that have become ingrained within me that I rely on when I am facing a challenge. These words of faith, hope, and love that we express in church, or more powerfully, as the church, as we have done so over past months, can sustain us in the most difficult times. “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all of the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” “For God so loved the world...” “Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Our Old Testament reading contains powerful words, not to be written on hard stones like the ten commandments, but to be written on soft hearts. “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.” This passage of faith, hope, and love in Jeremiah is spoken at a time when one would hardly expect such a definitive assurance of God's abiding presence. The time is six centuries before Christ would

be born. The Babylonians have conquered the kingdom of Judah and by force removed from them two of the clearest symbols that the Jewish people had of their God: the temple in Jerusalem, destroyed, and their king, Zedekiah, taken away in chains. This heartbreaking reality doesn't seem like the most likely situation to be speaking of relational bonds with God.

Have you ever had one of those days, or weeks, or years, when it seems like nothing is going in your favor? It feels like everything is stacking up against you. Whoever said bad things happen in threes can at times seem to be right, except when they hit you by the dozens. And then, right there in the middle of your misery, it seems there is that one person who interjects, "But God is always faithful," and you sort of want to backhand that person because it is hard to feel that and believe such things at certain times. That annoying person has a name – it's Jeremiah.

What the prophet Jeremiah wanted his people to know in one of their greatest moments of heartbreak is that God's faithfulness is steadfast, even when how we've recognized God in the past isn't necessarily in sync with our current reality, even when we have not allowed God's good intent to penetrate our external shield. Yet, despite our unfaithfulness, our rebellion, our violence toward one another and creation, we are written on God's heart and God vows to not give up on us.

Now, if we listen carefully, Jeremiah doesn't say that God has already written this covenant on our hearts, but instead that is what God wants and intends to do. The days are surely coming, Jeremiah says. They're on their way. We're leaning into them. This is what God desires, and it would serve us well to welcome God's loving presence into the core of our being.

As a vow, God says: "I will put my law within them. I will write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No 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, for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more." There are some who hear these powerful words and wonder if God gets tired of allowing human freedom in this thing, that maybe what God has in mind is some kind of computer chip implanted within us so that, finally, we will have no other choice but to be faithful and obedient to God's ways. After all, that law will

be within us - it will be written on our hearts. We'll all know God, it sounds like, because we won't have any other choice.

I don't buy that interpretation. For what God wants and has always wanted is not to control us, but to be in a committed, loving relationship with us. The law reveals God's loving, good intent for humankind and God's eternal covenant with all creation that is holy, precious, and beautiful.

And in the life of Jesus, we discover the lengths to which God will go to write this covenantal love on our hearts. We find it to be a redeeming love that shows us how bold and selfless God's love is. We learn about a crucified love that reveals the depth of pain God will endure to reach and redeem us. We experience the power of a resurrected love that cannot be swallowed up by any setback or disappointment, not even death itself, because it is an eternal love that knows no end.

It is out of a context of this divine committed loving relationship to us that my ministerial colleagues and I on this day get to invite those who have been elected to serve as Deacons or Ruling Elders to affirm some powerful words, to take some vows this day. Please note that after the officers take their vows, you will also be invited to take vows to support them in their service to this congregation.

Words said to us and words we get to say to one another can have great power. Out of a context of God's great love and faithfulness, that are stronger than any loss we have experienced or anxiety we have known, we have the opportunity to show what is on our hearts by uttering powerful words that bind us to God and to one another. Some say that talk is cheap; it means nothing. But when God enables us to truly express words of faith, hope, and love, make no mistake about it, such expressions have the power to change our hearts and to change the world. Thanks be unto God. Amen.