

Forgiveness Without the Props

Jeremiah 31:31-14; Hebrews 10:8-18

So after taking us on a tour of the Old Testament sanctuaries, sprinkling us with blood, washing us in water, tying scarlet wool on our window sashes, and painting our doorways with blood red hyssop, after showing us every Old Testament picture of forgiveness he can remember, the author to Hebrews returns a second time to the prophet Jeremiah, who some 600 years before Christ confronted a generation of people for whom none of these pictures worked.

In Jeremiah's day, the Babylonians put all the Old Testament architecture and furniture to the ax and to the torch and they dragged God's people far from home, where they would live in camps and hovels without any of it. No golden candelabra lighting up a holy place where bread is out on the table waiting for God's invited guests. No golden ark behind the curtain, filled with wonders, waiting for that single priest who once a year stood before the Almighty and won God's people forgiveness for yet another year. Jeremiah saw it all torn down and taken away.

But strangely, with all the buildings and furniture and pictures and symbols torn down and broken up and gone up in smoke, God's forgiveness was still there. Jeremiah stayed at home, living in the rubble and God had him send a letter to the refugee camps in Babylon and in his letter God assured his people that they weren't too far away or too far gone for him to care. Listen to what God told them, he said: *"For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not calamity, to give you a future and a hope. And you will call to me and I will hear you. You will seek me and you will find me when you seek me with all your heart."*

The point being that God's people were still dear to him even after they lost it all. All the pictures and devices Moses gave them to dress up and shine up their piety were taken away from them, and the Israelites were left with a tent and a bowl and a spoon, nothing to own, nothing to rule, and nothing to show for all those centuries that God had lived among them. And just at the moment Israel might have been tempted to give up the exercise, who appears in the refugee camps and in the slave quarters of the Babylonian palace but God.

Ezekiel in the camps and Daniel in the palace were both given visions in which the Almighty shows them a future in which God will bring back to life all the hopes and dreams that were shattered by Israel's folly and sin. Likewise back in the Holy Land, sitting among the rubble, Jeremiah heard messages from God laying out a future where God would reach us and change us in ways that no ritual, no picture could ever get across: *"This is the covenant I will make with them after those days, declares the LORD, I will give my law in their hearts and write it in their minds...and their sins and lawless deeds I will remember no more."*

So our author brings us for a second visit with Jeremiah is to remind the early Christians and us that what brings us near and makes us dear to God is not our performance at any sort of regimen or ritual, but rather where we stand with Christ, the Priest that all those Old Testament rituals

hinted at and pointed toward. The danger they faced in the first century is, I think, the same danger we face today, namely the illusion that redemptive patterns and principles and disciplines can be mastered and executed without redemptive relationships, with our first wanting and loving and knowing Christ and without our living out the love and forgiveness we learn from him with each other.

And it's a fine distinction because biblical patterns and principles and disciplines are an indispensable part of what forms and guides us as people. All the old boundaries and fences we learn from religion and tradition and example and story will bring us a world of good and keep us from a world of trouble if we mind them. But take all those fences and boundaries together and swallow them whole and they still won't save our souls.

Because saving our souls involves more than achieving good outcomes and avoiding bad ones. The Old Testament shows us a parade of people who were near and dear to God even though their mastery of godly fences and boundaries were mixed at best. But they wanted and loved and got to know God, often even as their circumstances and relationships fell apart all around them. It's a fine distinction because what we do and how we treat people matters to God. We're commanded to do right and to make amends and to build and heal and help however and whenever we can.

And the irony is that no one will save his soul without attending to the commands. To ignore the commands, to trample the boundaries and fences and people God holds sacred is to prove that we know nothing of and care nothing for God. Ignore the commandments and we will surely lose our souls. But it is also true that no one will save his soul by keeping the commandments either. Not because they aren't worth keeping, but because they are so far beyond us we can't get it done.

Old Testament worship was awash in blood and aswim in water and full of colors and pictures and symbols, all designed to get across how much trouble we're in and how much forgiveness we'll need to ever get anywhere near God. Day by day, year after year, over and over again it went on. Because without these hard lessons and sad stories we would never grasp how high and pure is God's goodness and how deep and convoluted is our sin.

Till we take that to heart, the spectacle of God the Son become a man and hanging on a cross and dying in our place doesn't make the slightest bit of sense. Last Wednesday night, we hosted a seminar on addiction recovery and faith. We heard a devout Catholic doctor give a wise and skillful presentation about what makes it so tough for a person to get clear of drug abuse once the drug has altered his or her brain chemistry. It turns out that once you're in, once the drug gains traction, you'll pretty much need a whole life regimen to ever get clear.

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ncluding a spiritual regimen. And wisely, compassionately, our Doc pulled out the trusty old 12 Step Program to Recovery that I've heard and known about for years. It is so popular, it has worked so well for so many people, because 12 Step Recovery is essentially built on the patterns

and disciplines and relationships that Jesus taught the disciples to practice in the early church as a way to get clear of what they used to be and become what God's called them to be.

12 Step Recovery is essentially a rewrite of what Christ taught us to do in church, if we ever want to get clear of our own wants and needs and selfishness and pride and all those spiritual bruises and fractures that keep us from trusting and loving God and each other. So we are confronted by the spectacle of addicts, practicing in their recovery groups, the redemptive disciplines that Jesus taught but that Christians ignore, I think, because we imagine we're fine the way we are. We don't think that we have problems big enough to require regular attention in redemptive relationships involving discipline and encouragement and accountability.

At least in part because we haven't listened to what the gospel teaches about human nature, all those bloody rituals and sad stories that the book of Hebrews has made me rehearse for ten chapters. Or perhaps we imagine that honesty and encouragement and accountability can't be found at church, the place being filled with phonies and hypocrites and all the other stereotypes that people generally imagine populate our sanctuaries.

Which brings us back to Jeremiah sitting in the rubble that used to be Jerusalem dreaming of a future when God would move past rituals and pictures and breathe into our hearts something fresh and true and powerful enough to bring life to the mornings we spend reading Our Daily Bread and the Sundays we spend worshiping in church. Because it's the relationship that lends the regimen all its life and power.

Addicts can recover from the most desperate circumstances to the extent they are held accountable in relationships that are both encouraging and brutally honest. They are sanctified, set apart in one area of their lives from behavior that would destroy them if they didn't get free of it. And the outcome, if they hold to the regimen, is recovery. They can become clean and enjoy a life far better than what they would have had without the regimen and the relationships that came with it.

What Jeremiah saw sitting in the rubble was something significantly more, something profoundly different than recovery, as wonderful as recovery can be. Jeremiah saw God transcending furniture and rituals, regimens and disciplines and outcomes to reach to the heart of the matter which is that we are bent inside whether we're addicts or not. We are estranged from God and at odds with what is true and at war with what is right in a way that is irrecoverable unless God himself should act to make it right.

And what Jeremiah was inspired to know was that God would act in two ways. First, he would atone for what is bent and wrong in our hearts and for all the wrongs and injuries we inflict. Christ's death in our place would allow the Almighty to administer the unconditional acceptance that everyone knows is the starting line of any redemptive relationship. But to be wholly redeemed, to move past recovery for this or that and to gain salvation we need acceptance from God and Christ has gained that for us, if we want it.

So because Christ died in our place God has promised to “*remember our sins no more*”, a wonderful thing. But then Jeremiah saw in the rubble that God would work in our hearts to weave his law, his truth into our thoughts and feelings and into our ways of life as well. The point being that if redemptive relationships with people who understand and identify with your problems are good, then a redemptive relationship with the God who made you and the Savior who died for you is better than good.

Salvation is better than recovery. Recovery solves a set of problems, salvation heals the whole person inside and out. Recovery is built on honest, accepting, encouraging relationships with other people on the same path. And salvation involves the same sort of relationships, but is founded on God’s promise that he will both forgive us our sins and change us if we’ll only make ourselves available to him first, and then to people in church as well.

Of course, the church is in disrepute. Our calling is so high, and our failures so dramatic that a Greek choir of ignorant souls will tell you to go anywhere but church if you want to be loved and accepted and helped. But the gospel teaches otherwise. If the Almighty will accept us as we are and bring us where we need to go, then we can trust each other to learn and live his grace with each other. The problem is we lack the faith to try.