*HERESIES OF THE HEART*

Jeremiah 31:27-34

March 21, 2021

To appreciate the longings, the spiritual hopes and dreams, that met the words of Jeremiah, you only need to scratch the surface of the historical situation that composed the prophet’s world. Early in the prophet’s life, Assyria and Egypt had begun stumbling from exhaustion in the race for dominance in the Middle Eastern provinces, just as a new runner entered the competition – Babylon. Before Babylon reached her full strength, however, tiny Judah regained some of its spiritual, if not its political, vigor under the influence of King Josiah’s Deuteronomic reform movement, where the scripture of Deuteronomy was apparently rediscovered, and Josiah was captured by it. He knew Judah needed to repent and reclaim its love for God, so Josiah declared that the book of the Law (Deuteronomy, in this case) be read from beginning to end before the people, and every seven years after that.

Yet the reform was too little, too late. Judah’s king was killed in battle, the political life of the country soured, and Babylon leered over its borders, stronger and more threatening each year. Finally, in 587 Judah was invaded, Jerusalem sieged and sacked, and the holy Temple of the Lord was burned to the ground.

Biblical scholars suggest that Jeremiah’s hopeful message of rebirth and deliverance was written exactly for that most soul crushing catastrophe. Gathering to re-read the Deuteronomic codes in Jerusalem, the priests of Judah an 587 found themselves standing in rubble. A Prof. William Holladay proposes that Jeremiah’s words were composed, in Deuteronomic style, to be read along with that scroll. These words of hope and new promise from God are even more life-giving when considered under such catastrophic circumstances.

This is the covenant which 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 upon their hearts, and I will be their

God, and they shall be my people.

And no longer shall each one teach their

neighbor saying, ‘Know the Lord,’

*[You won’t need these Deuteronomic*

*Reforms to your spirit , because . . .]*

they shall all know me from the

least of them to the greatest,

says the Lord.

See, what God now proposes is a radical step, nothing short of a new kind of human being will be created out of this new covenant. Whereas the old covenant was delivered on the heels of political salvation (bringing the Hebrews out of bondage in Egypt) the new covenant will be established on the promise of personal salvation (a God-centered heart.) The new covenant needs no stone tablets to establish its parameters; God’s precepts and intentions will be as much a part of the people’s internal structures as their very heartbeats.

Josiah had the priests read the scriptures; he wanted his people to regain their scriptural and doctrinal foundations from the scrolls of God. But in this complex, open-ended, multiple-choice age, you and I rarely dwell on the established doctrinal foundations of our faith. Even less do we seriously entertain the notion of *heretical views* that might undermine those foundations.

In its past the Church has been inflamed by “heretical” doctrines that challenged prohibited ways of thinking about God’s relationship to humanity. Today those who lost the historical battle with the majority are only thought to generally illustrate righthearted believers with wrongheaded ideas. A heresy, we are convinced, is just an out-dated concept representing out-of-step believers.

But heresies have begun springing up like dandelions in congregations all over the country. The heretical notions entertained by these weeds in faith’s field no longer wrap themselves in a protective casing of intellectualized doctrinal debates. The heresies that most threaten the church and her mission today are heresies of the heart. Attitudes like spiritual apathy, denominational arrogance, cultural anonymity, and social animosity are among the prevalent heresies causing heart failure in the church nowadays.

Heresies of the heart take many forms, some insidious, some blatant, some circular, but all dangerous. Heretical doctrines have never really threated the soul of the Church or harmed the nature of God. Heretical hearts, however, can suck the spirit of a living Christ out of a congregation and break God’s heart on their stony surfaces.

Studies conducted by New York’s Albert Einstein College of Medicine of some 800,000 people found that when they have heart attacks, (when the heart goes) the mind often follows: Alzheimer’s disease and other forms of dementia. So too it is spiritually, that when the heart of the church is sick, the mind of the church gets perverted and disturbed.

Among those heresies most heartrending to God and productive of dementia and amnesia in the church are heresies of hope, heresies of love, and heresies of faith.

Heresies of hope deny God’s promises, refusing to believe that God’s words and deeds are for today as well as yesterday and tomorrow. The heretics of hope would have stood in the destroyed temple, mute and mournful, oblivious to and indeed, resentful of Jeremiah’s words of consolation. All God’s promises are in vain. Human nature and our hardened hearts are beyond God’s healing touch. With no cause for hope there is no room for grace, and the result is a carefully nurtured spirit of divisiveness. On this spirit congregations are fragmented, marriages split, and retaining walls erected and fortified. The heresy of hopelessness may even lead Christians to embrace the catchall phrase “Irreconcilable Differences,” now seen as a legitimate complaint and an indisputable reality.

Listen in on conversations for some common Heresies of Hope: Things like, “It’s too late.” “Nothing can be done about it.” “You can’t fight city hall.” “GET REAL!” “GIVE UP!” “What’s the use?”

There’s a Peanuts comic strip in which Charlie Brown is complaining to Lucy: “Everywhere I go trouble follows me!” (Next frame): “No matter what I do, someone is always bringing problems to me.” (Next frame): “Sometimes I just feel that I can’t take it any more the way everyone unloads all their burdens on me.” And Lucy replies, “What you need, Charlie Brown, is an unlisted life.”

No, life is something is something like an exam (something often pondered by Charlie Brown and Linus.) An exam is something one takes and then moves on to other things. If one fails it, one tries harder and does better the next time. If you’re mucking around in the swamps of the valley, there is only one way out: Stop studying the swamps and go climb a mountain. Let go of your heresies of hope.

Heresies of the heart take shape as heresies of hope, heresies of love, and heresies of faith. Heresies of love range from despair, to vindictiveness, to perhaps the most heretical attitude of all: indifference.

Rollo May said that the most tragic thing of all in the long run is the ultimate attitude ‘It doesn’t matter.’ And Edmund Burke in the 18th century said “Nothing is so fatal to religion as indifference, which is, at least, half infidelity.”

I went to seminary with a John Sweet. He was one of my inner circle of close friends. And John had an older brother named Leonard Sweet, a Professor at Drew University School of Religion, and who wrote and edited a favorite preaching resource of mine. Leonard Sweet tells a story:

“Indifference in the church was made manifest to me before I gave a talk on the Beatitudes at a church dinner some years ago. One of the reasons why I’ll never forget the incident is that while coffee was being served, the pastor of the church, my host for the evening, leaned over and whispered in my ear, ‘Len, shall we let the people enjoy themselves a little longer or had we better begin your message now?” (!)

After my meditations on the Beatitudes, one woman, obviously one of those who ceased to enjoy herself the moment I stood up to speak, came to me and said, “Well, Dr. Sweet, if that’s what you call the Beatitudes, I leave them to you.” Here was a Christian who could not have cared less. She had no desire to hunger or thirst; she had no desire to be more than she was; least of all, she had no desire to be reviled and rejected. If God had such strange tastes, and if some people could join God in finding these Beatitudes a form of blessedness, they were free to do so. But not her.

Heresies of hope; heresies of love; and then there are heresies of faith. Tranquilizers. Tranquilizers without question are significant aids in helping people under severe stress work themselves out of it. But when *“tranquilizer”* becomes more than just a pill, when *tranquilizing* seems to be the cure for all of life, we’re in trouble. I think the woman in Leonard Sweet’s story of the Beatitudes wanted God to be a tranquilizer, not an energizer.

We tranquilize American minds by plugging our eyes into television sets. We tranquilize even our faith to the point where we take the edges off existence and live in glassy-eyed indifference. Faith says that God has a life for you. And around every corner, what a life!

An old Hasidic tale has a “pious” man [‘faithful,’ right?] the tale has a pious, faithful, man die after a lifetime of losing interest and tastes -- and all for the sake of God. A day or two after he reached heaven they threw him out. He could not understand or enjoy anything that was going on.

The Rev. Mary Birgelaitis tells the story of a three-year-old and a five-year-old who were playing on the floor while the adults finished their dinner. Lisa, the five-year-old, opened her new toy doctor’s kit and finally convinced her brother to be her patient. She took the little stethoscope from the bag and placed it on her brother’s chest. Listening intently—as good doctors do—she suddenly announced, “I hear somebody walking around in there.” The adults smiled knowingly, but little Ryan, the three-year-old, matter-of-factly answered, “Why, that must be Jesus.” So it is.

Amen.