

Bible Study
Proper 24, Year C
October 16, 2016

[RCL] Jeremiah 31:27-34; Psalm 119:97-104; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8

Jeremiah 31:27-34

The prophet's words vividly illustrate the much-anticipated community of the new covenant to a people who have been suffering in estrangement from YHWH for many years. Verses 27 through 30 use a potentially confusing metaphor to describe a common complaint, namely that innocent generations of God's covenant people are languishing as divine punishment for the sins of their forebears. In the future, Jeremiah tells us, only those who eat the sour grapes of disobedience will experience the troubling results.

Verse 31 is the only place in the Old Testament canon where we find the particular phrase translated here as "a new covenant." The next three verses, then, may provide us with a uniquely significant vision of this new covenant from a prophetic perspective that is firmly situated within (and honors) the community of the first covenant. This new covenant will be initiated by YHWH, who will write the law on each person's heart and forgive all sins.

- Consider the concept of God's law written on human hearts. How might an intuitive, uniquely personal divine law be more or less useful/interpretable/valuable than a physically written one?
- Verse 34 speaks of knowing the Lord. What kind of knowledge is being described? Is it an intellectual awareness of God's existence, or is there something more to Jeremiah's knowledge?

Psalm 119:97-104

These verses are undeniably beautiful. However, today's readers may find ourselves confused in the midst of this unrestrained praise of divine law. American Christians tend not to associate words like law, commandments, and decrees with concepts like love and sweetness. Generally speaking, we don't like being told what to do (even if God is the one telling us)! But the Psalmist carries no such baggage. These verses celebrate and rejoice over the law – not so much as a written document of rules to be followed, but as a dynamic and invaluable revelation of God's will and character for the benefit of human lives.

- Compare and contrast verse 97's "in my mind" with the description of the law being written on hearts from Jeremiah 31:33. How do these two metaphors complement each other, and what differences of nuance might we infer?
- What might this effusive celebration of divine commandments teach us if we consider it in light of Jesus's commandments, as recorded in the Gospels? Where can we find sweetness easily, and where are we challenged to find sweetness?

2 Timothy 3:14 - 4:5

Paul's second letter to Timothy strikes a more personal, almost fatherly, tone than his first. In 3:14-15, Paul refers to Timothy's younger years and the people who first taught him about God, namely his mother, Eunice, and grandmother, Lois. Paul himself was a later instructor to Timothy (hence the fatherly tone), and his recognition of the foundational importance of Eunice's and Lois's teachings may serve to solidify his emphasis on the role of the Hebrew scriptures with regards to the Gospel of Christ. The Old Testament (although of course Paul would not have used such language) is not to be discarded or ignored; rather, it is divinely inspired and perpetually useful alongside the Gospel.

In 4:1-5, Paul encourages Timothy to remain steadfast in his Gospel ministry, with special attention to the challenge of "itching ears" (vs. 3). These "itching ears" do not necessarily indicate malicious or destructive intent on the part of the hearer. One's ears might itch out of curiosity, intrigue, or excitement, but the potential result of scratching the itch is spiritual disaster. Our "itching ears" can lead us away from the challenging but saving Gospel to the more palatable but empty myths that surround us.

- How does Paul's description of the Old Testament as sacred and inspired challenge us, particularly regarding places where we may sense a contrast between OT messages and the words of Jesus?
- What causes our ears to "itch," and what practices or strategies can help us resist scratching those itches?

Luke 18:1-8

The parable of the widow and the unjust judge does not appear in any of the other canonical Gospels. Equally intriguing is the author's statement of the lesson in the first verse. Why does Luke bother recording the entire parable when he has already told us that it means we should "pray always and not [to] lose heart"? Perhaps there is more depth to this parable than is captured in verse 1.

Consider the judge and the widow. This judge appears to be the opposite of what a judge should be – whereas a judge in this context should be the widow's ally and should use his power to render justice in light of God's laws and in favor of the needy, this judge doesn't care about the widow, or her problems, or even God! And the widow, who is powerless in her society, uses the only assets she has at her disposal – persistence and honesty.

The judge eventually rules in the widow's favor, not because he cares for justice, but because her honesty and persistence are a problem for him. The language of verse 5, where the judge says that the widow is "bothering" him and may "wear [him] out" by repeatedly bringing her complaint, has some illuminating alternate translations including "shaming," "embarrassing," and even "slapping [the judge] in the face!" Thus the widow, conventionally powerless, has claimed a righteous power and brought about justice and vindication through her persistence and honesty.

- Where might we see persistent cries for justice from those who lack conventional power in our own communities, and how might we be called to engage and/or respond?
- Jesus ends the parable with a striking question: “[W]hen the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” How can we support one another in persistence, honesty, and faith in spite of tragedy, injustice, and division?

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