

Sermon Text for January 29, 2017

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Jeremiah 31:31-34, Romans 2:12-16, 29

“What is a covenant?”

It has been a pretty interesting week as I have been studying about covenants in the midst of executive orders that have been coming down pretty rapidly and in such a way that they are having a real impact on people. Some of you may feel like these orders don't really affect us personally. I spent five years in a context where we were vetting refugees, many of whom were members of our church, so that they could come to the United States. I know the stories of Esther from Ethiopia who was arrested for speaking out against her government, thrown in prison with me with the guards laughing and the next morning told to behave or she would get something worse. I know the story of Bismark who was stabbed five times after he left our church and because he was from Ghana and was not able to stay in Russia he was applying to be a refuge in the US. So, maybe you think that the stoppage of desperate good people coming into this country is the Christian thing to do, and that it doesn't really affect us, I know that it affects me simply because I am a disciple of Jesus Christ, and I hope you consider yourself one, because if you do, then it does affect you. I challenge any Christian to give Scriptural justification to turning away the stranger and I will give you five examples of my Savior who says our very salvation may depend on how we embrace the stranger.

As strongly as I feel about this executive order, there might be one where I feel even stronger and more passionate and I simply will not stand for it. There is so much going on around us and so many different voices and people are saying different things and you wonder who do we believe and who do we trust? Is there such a thing as alternative truth and if so then can we say that there is an alternative truth to Jesus. Sure Jesus said I am the way the truth and the life, but maybe that's just his opinion. Maybe there are other truths besides Jesus that are just as viable. How are we to know?

Both of our readings today speak about covenants and covenants, or agreements and promises are all built on trust. A contract is built on a trust that the person or the others side of the table will follow through on their end of the bargain. In many parts of the world a contract isn't worth much because there is no trust. We set up apartments all over Moscow for refugees of color because we knew that at any moment if the landlord found a “better” tenant then they would be kicked out on the street. A contract was just piece of paper and didn't signify anything

beyond that. Our relationship with Jesus is based on trust. Jesus says if you follow me you will have eternal life. We believe him and we follow.

Our relationship to each other and our relationship to the community is based on trust. When we say that we are a family and that we can lean on each other during surgery or when a loved one dies, we expect it to happen. When we tell the community that we are here for you they don't expect us to build walls around our social services and expect them to pay for it. They trust us, we trust each other, because we trust our Savior Jesus Christ.

Today we are going to learn about this covenant that God has made with us and how that covenant leads to the forgiveness of sin and how that forgiveness has to lead us to action.

Today we are going to try to answer that question of what is a covenant by seeing what both Jeremiah and Paul in Romans have to say about it. Jeremiah begins in vs.31 by saying that the days are surely coming, so he points to the future that for him had not arrived yet. Now for us today we know that this new covenant has been given to us in the person of Jesus. He tells us the new one will be like the old one.

The old one was one where the following of the covenant was up to us and we did a terrible job as seen in our ancestors who came out of Egypt. They did not obey that covenant. Remember the golden calf of two weeks ago and last week their unfaithfulness which caused them to remain in the wilderness for 40 years. So as a result God will write this new covenant on our hearts. They won't have to remember all that the Lord requires because he will have already written it on their heart.

This new covenant, Jeremiah says in vs.31, is for the purpose of the forgiveness of their sins. They no longer will play an active role in having their sin forgiven, it will no longer be up to them as to whether they are forgiven or not, this will be exclusively God's work. God will write this covenant on their hearts.

So we move from a conditional covenant agreement, you follow the law and I'll forgive you to an unconditional one where we hear that we have been forgiven and I have written it on your heart. Throughout the Old Testament we find God making covenants with us based upon our obedience. He makes a covenant with Adam and Noah and Abraham and Moses. In all of these God expected us to fulfill our part of the bargain and we have been consistently predictable. We have been unfaithful.

And here in Jeremiah instead of God saying I give up because you will never do what I ask you, he says, the days are surely coming when I will write my covenant, my agreement, my

promise, upon your heart and will not put you in a position where we have to respond but where you will respond out of thanksgiving.

Brothers and sisters, hear the good news of the Gospel. Jesus is the covenant that was written upon our hearts. We didn't die on the cross, Jesus did. We didn't rise from the dead, although we will, but Jesus did. We didn't conquer death and sin, although we will, Jesus did.

Let's turn to Romans to see how Paul takes up Jeremiah's words and puts them in terms of our Savior. Paul tells us very plainly that we all have the covenant of Jesus on our hearts, those who have heard of him and those that have not. We have all been called to live in that covenant and respond to it. We have established that Jesus has written his name on our hearts. But there is more to it. Look at vs.13, just because today you have heard about this covenant to which you have access, it doesn't give you a free ride.

All have been chosen but that doesn't give you a free ride. Judgement will not depend on your history within the church or your background and how many generations of faithful people you can count in your family. No, Paul says it will depend on how His story has become your story out there. You can be a church member and a church goes but not a doer of God's will. God's grace does not eliminate his judgment. At vs.16 we read that he will judge even the secret thoughts of all.

These verses in Romans speak about the new covenant to which Jeremiah was referring. Paul uses the word law eleven times in five verses to contrast the covenant that God has established with us. We read Jesus came to fulfill the law in Matthew 5:17, he is the completeness of the covenant. This is where vs.29 comes into play. We read that a person is truly a disciple if they are able to live out their covenant based upon their heart, almost as if it is second nature.

Jesus gave us two very clear works of his covenant. While in the Old Testament circumcision, again vs.29, was the physical brand of someone who lived in the covenant of God, we now have two spiritual markers for the covenant which has taken the place of circumcision: baptism and communion. You can't understand a covenant within the Christian faith without knowing that baptism and communion are the sign and the seals of that covenant with God. When we baptize and when we take communion together we are declaring that God has written his covenant on our hearts.

Our lives have to reflect our baptism, our communion together as works of the covenant that God has established with us. Today we ordained and installed men and women, this is key, look at vs.11 in chapter 2, God shows no partiality. In this covenant, contrasting with

circumcision, the covenant is open to all, not just the men as the old covenant was limited. These men and women are taking a step away from being hearers towards being doers. They have made promises and have made a covenant with you to serve you with joy.

A covenant has to do with trust. You need to trust these men and women as they lead you just as they trust you to support them with prayer, time, energy, talents. So much of what we do around here is based on trust and promises and covenants with each other and covenants we have with God.

The fact that God has made a covenant with us does not excuse us. Rather, we are a covenant people with all the implications and responsibilities that comes with that. May God bless us as we look to live that out. Amen.