

Lent 5B – New Song “Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, ‘Sir, we wish to see Jesus.’” (John 12:20)

I shall never forget the first time, as a young priest, I climbed into a pulpit as a visiting preacher and saw a 3 by 5 card taped to the note tray – “Sir, we wish to see Jesus,” it stated. There was a time when it was not that uncommon to have that fragment of today’s Gospel displayed in pulpits to remind preachers that that is really our task – to help people see Jesus!

On that first encounter with it I was so shocked that I couldn’t even remember what I was supposed to preach on! But the advice is sound. And it is what preachers of the Gospel are called to do...each and every Sunday. And why it is such an awesome responsibility.

I think the best way I might be able to approach doing that on this particular Fifth Sunday in Lent is to reflect with you a bit on the concept of a “new covenant,” which we first hear about in this morning’s first Lesson from Jeremiah:

“The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors...I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts...” (Jeremiah 31:31-33)

What might it mean to have God’s law “within us,” to have it written “on our hearts?” Well let’s start by thinking a bit about the law itself. The people of Israel had always felt special because they understood themselves to be the ones to whom God had given the law.

During their journey to freedom, through their time sojourning in the desert, and from the hand of Moses, they believed that God had shown them how they were expected to live in order to sustain their fragile community and become a light to the world.

First of all by observing the 10 Commandments (or the 10 “Teachings,” as Mel reminded us in his sermon on Lent 3) – four duties toward God (to serve only One God, not to worship idols, not to take God’s name lightly, and to keep the Sabbath day). And six duties toward one another (to honor one’s ancestors, and not to murder, commit adultery, steal, lie, or covet another’s possessions). If they would

just live like this, their community would hang together even in the midst of adversity and people would notice!

The problem is, they couldn't keep those Commandments (or the over 600 other laws, derivative from the Commandments that the priests and scribes had come up with over the course of the centuries) and so they always felt guilty. And even that God was angry with them! That God had forsaken them because of their sins. That God might even send poisonous serpents among them, like we heard in last Sunday's reading!

Jeremiah knew that dilemma. And he also knew that people would never be able to keep the commandments and laws if they remained some external set of rules and regulations which had to be obeyed in order to please God. So, it was his prayer that God would somehow make the law an inward thing, written not on tablets of stone, but on their hearts!

But how was that to happen? Well, in today's Lesson Jeremiah hears God say, "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." (Jeremiah 31:34).

The Psalmist has the same insight this morning, "Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquities/ Create in me a clean **heart**, O God, and renew a right spirit **within me**." (Psalm 51:10-11)

In other words, the new covenant, the law written in our hearts, has something to do with our awareness of God's mercy and God's forgiveness. Let me state it plainly: AS LONG AS YOU THINK YOU HAVE TO OBEY THE LAW FOR GOD TO LOVE YOU, YOU WILL NEVER BE ABLE TO KEEP IT. It's like an athlete "choking up" when she has to make that final free throw to win the game. And it falls short.

BUT WHEN YOU REALIZE THAT YOU ARE ALREADY FORGIVEN, NO MATTER WHAT YOU DO, YOU WILL BE FREE TO TRY TO LIVE LIKE GOD WANTS YOU TO, OUT OF THANKSGIVING, NOT OUT OF FEAR. Like that same athlete, knowing that her team is ahead, relaxing, and letting her natural abilities guide that basketball through the hoop – nothing but net!

We don't try to obey God's laws in order to be saved. We try to obey those laws in thanksgiving for the fact that we've already been saved!

And that's what Jeremiah and the Psalmist and finally Jesus were trying to teach us! The same Jesus who the book of Hebrews tells us, "...offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to **save him...**" (Hebrews 5:7) The same Jesus who told his disciples in today's Gospel, "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw **all people** to myself." (John 12:32)

This Jesus, in his full humanity, came to teach us that we are saved by God's love, not by our own efforts. Just look at his life! Jesus healed first, and asked questions later! Never did he make his healing grace or God's love dependent on how perfect we are or try to become.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus heals the centurion's son first, without even seeing him...and then the centurion believed. He healed the blind man by the pool at Bethsaida first...and then told him to take up his mat. He fed the 5,000 first...and only then did they proclaim him as their king. He walks on the water first...and then tells them not to fear.

He forgives the woman caught in adultery first...and only then tells her to go and sin no more. (He doesn't tell her to clean up her act first and then forgive her!). Jesus heals the man born blind first...without any concern about who had sinned, the man or his parents! He raises Lazarus from the dead first...and then tells them to unbind him and let him go free.

All these are signs, for those with eyes to see, of what our God is really like! God is not a stern taskmaster, holding out his love and approval until we have met some impossible standard. God is a loving parent who does not wait for the Prodigal child to return but runs to meet us – before we have even reached the gate! That is the gospel! That is the good news!

For, "the days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant...it will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors...But this is the covenant that I will make...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...for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more." (Jeremiah 31 passim)

[1. What kind of God did you grow up believing in?

2. Has your image of God changed over the years? What happened to make it change?]