

Pentecost 19, Year C  
Jeremiah 31:27-34  
October 20, 2019

Even a cursory glance at the Old Testament reveals that there is plenty of violence, and from the point of view of the authors of these books, some of it is not only encouraged by God, it is caused by God. Much of it is a result of what is known as collective guilt, the crimes of one member of a society lead to the punishment of all. The slaughter of all the people of Ai and the destruction of their city is one example, as is the aftermath of the rape of Dinah when Simeon and Levi took revenge not just on Shechem himself, but on his whole village, killing everyone in it. These are but two of many examples in the bible. Nor is this concept reserved only for the enemies of Israel. Observing the faithlessness of some in the wilderness, God decided that the entire generation of those who left Egypt would spend their lives wandering. None of the original refugees, except Joshua, would find a home in the promised land. For good measure, both Exodus and Numbers contain passages in which God declares that he will visit the iniquity of the fathers on the sons down to “the third and fourth generations.”

That is one of the two things that makes our passage from Jeremiah so important. Today we see the end of the notion of collective guilt. This isn't the first mention of the abolition of collective guilt, but it is among the most important. Jeremiah declares in the name of God that “In those days they shall no longer say ‘the parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.’” When God's will is truly done, punishment for crimes will be restricted to the individual.

Today, we are so used to the notion of individual responsibility that the whole idea of collective guilt seems repugnant. Yet, as WWII and many other examples demonstrate, the modern world still believes, at least at times, in collective guilt. Stalin's purges, Hitler's "Final Solution," Pol Pot's depopulation of the cities, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the treatment of Native Americans across nearly three centuries could not have happened, despite the manifold ways in which these actions were justified, were it not for the continuing power of the notion of collective guilt lying just below the surface of human consciousness, from where it periodically bubbles to the surface. Thus, Jeremiah's remarkable reworking of the whole biblical concept of justice still critiques human behavior, even to this day. Perhaps we might recall this to mind at a moment when being a Muslim or a native Spanish speaker sometimes creates suspicion in the minds of otherwise very good people.

But there is another even more powerful concept of divine justice working in this passage, one that the folks who insist the God of the Old Testament is nasty and mean while the God of the New is loving and kind never seem to notice. What we also see in this passage is something that nearly everyone has trouble with, unconditional forgiveness. God is going to make a new covenant with the people of Israel, one written not in tablets of stone, but on their hearts, not because the people repented and became faithful again, but precisely because they didn't. It is because Israel broke the first covenant that God is creating a second one, it is because Israel was faithless that God determines to transform the people so completely that they will do by nature what God requires. It is because they don't deserve forgiveness that God finally determines to "forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more."

Nor is this the only place in the Old Testament we see this. Indeed, it is everywhere if you just look. Cain murders his brother Abel, and God protects him from harm, not because Cain says “Sorry about that,” but because God’s mercy overcomes his horror at what Cain has done. God repents of the evil he intended in the flood, and determines never to do that again, not because people have changed, but because God realizes that “the thoughts of their hearts are evil from their youth.” Redemption, if it is to come, has to come as gift, God determines.

More pointedly, listen to God’s pain as revealed through Hosea: “How can I give you up, O Ephraim. How can I hand you over, O Israel.... My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger, I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not man.” Sit with that for a minute. Not a word about the people first repenting and God responding to that repentance. Not a particle of “spiritual growth” on the part of Israel. God forgives because God is bigger than people, and more important, bigger even than His own wrath.

The Old Testament is full of these examples and they all point in the same direction: the mercy of God always overcomes the wrath of God. In the Old Testament God’s forgiveness is ultimately unconditional. What we have, therefore in this passage, and the others like it is something truly remarkable, and rarely noticed. God here is being de-anthropologized, if that is a word. One of the favorite things people do is to notice how sacred texts make God out to be a giant person, and attribute to God purely human actions and motives. Ha Ha Ha, isn’t that primitive. These passages move in the opposite direction. They point out how unlike people God, and God’s sense of justice is. The God we see in the Old Testament, forgives unconditionally, forgives, in other words, not because we change, not because we get better, not

because we have atoned for our various transgressions, but because we haven't. One crucial Old Testament theme is that forgiveness precedes human change; repentance follows God's forgiveness. Because the Bible is not consistent throughout - that just isn't a value for the Old Testament writers - there are examples of other concepts of justice at work, but one giant motif in the Old Testament is that people don't change because they want to be forgiven, they change because they realize in the midst of the horror of what they have caused that they have already been forgiven.

Mostly, most of us don't like that. Mostly people want to think forgiveness must follow repentance and amendment of life. Think of every grudge ever held, just as a tiny example of this, and ask yourself what are grudges about? Usually they persist because the person who did wrong is insufficiently repentant for the harmed person to let go of the damage that was done, and therefore forgiveness is withheld, sometimes for an entire life. We believe naturally that justice happens when forgiveness follows change, not the other way around. Today we see that God is not like us. Forgiveness precedes repentance, and indeed, forgiveness often creates repentance. But even when it doesn't, and here is the real problem for us, in example after example in the Old Testament, God, who is "not like man," forgives anyway. That, for most people, most of the time, simply doesn't feel fair. Not only that, it feels like an invitation to abuse, since the forgiven person is free to continue being bad.

To that idea, which makes perfect sense to nearly everyone even and perhaps especially Christians, there is but one Christian response, Jesus Christ. As his death was interpreted by the first people who believed so deeply in him - Jews all, by the way - Jesus is the way God incarnated this whole Old Testament theme of Divine mercy conquering Divine wrath and

overcoming it forever. God forgave the people who crucified Jesus utterly and completely before Jesus drew his last breath, that is how the story goes. And God forgives every single one of us before ever we realize what we have done. Human forgiveness might indeed of necessity follow human transgression, human crime; that is the way we are built. That is the way societies are run smoothly and safely. But God isn't like us. In Christ, you and I are forgiven before ever we have the faintest notion we have done wrong, before ever we get so much as a glimpse of the problems we have created and the damage we have done. Therefore the only question for us is what happens in our hearts and souls when we realize what we have done, and realize as well what God has done? Do we stay stuck in our evil, convinced of our utter unworthiness? Do we perhaps insist upon our innocence? Or does forgiveness change us? Does forgiveness write in our hearts a new way of being? The hope and promise of Jeremiah is that unconditional forgiveness will in the fullness of time bring about the complete transformation of humanity. That time has not yet come, we are not yet like God. But because, against all my natural and human instincts, I believe in what God did in Jesus, I continue to hope for the fulfillment of that promise, and to believe that it is God's will for earth as well as heaven.