

Sunday October 19, 2025
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 24

Sermon: “Impenetrable?”

I struggled this week trying to decide which text to go with. The gospel lesson is the parable of the widow and the unjust judge. You remember the one. The widow has been (falsely, we assume) accused of something and she is seeking justice against her accuser, but the judge will not hear her case, nor even listen to her. She is persistent and waits for the judge each day and each day cries for justice. Eventually the judge gives in and listens to her “so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.”

In the Old Testament text Jeremiah offers words of hope. The first half of the reading, which we did not read, Jeremiah says, “I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, says the Lord.” Jerusalem is defeated; the city walls broken down; the temple razed; the city laid waste; the people taken to Babylon. Yet the message that Jeremiah delivers is this, “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 when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that 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 on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

So, how many here can tell me what a covenant is? Can you tell me how it is different than a contract? A contract is a formal, legal exchange of promises between parties for goods, services, or property, requiring offer, acceptance, consideration, and intent to create legal relations, and is enforceable by law. A covenant, on the other hand, is a deeply personal and spiritual bond, often with a divine element, where parties commit to a profound, relational

partnership with a shared goal, and it is often sealed with oaths, signs, rituals, and it implies an enduring commitment that transcends mere legal terms. So, who can tell me about at least one covenant that you are party to? (covenant between DUC and Rev. Mark Perry and ARWRC and God; covenant between husband and wife and God)

As the end of our covenant is rapidly approaching, I couldn't shake the feeling that covenant is what I needed to explore, so I chose the Old Testament lesson. The covenant we are in is deeply personal and spiritual, was sealed with oaths (promises), symbols (Bible, cup and loaf, etc.) and ritual (covenanting service). Above all, like all covenants, it is relational – there is a commitment on my part towards you, and on your part towards me.

So what was the covenant that the Israelites broke with God – though he was their husband? The covenant was to be God's people, and for God to be their God. They would worship no other, they would make no graven images, they would not use the Lord's name in vain, they would keep the Sabbath, they would. This is starting to sound a lot like the Ten Commandments. That is exactly what is going on. The two tablets of stone were the symbols, the physical representation of the promises or oaths. Amongst other things, the Israelites put their trust in Egypt instead of God when the Babylonian army came knocking.

What about us? The Israelites had the covenant written on two stone tablets, and those tablets represented the relationship between them and God. Have we done the same with our buildings? Are the bricks and sticks that surround us the physical representation of our relationship with God?

The problem is whether it is stone tablets or buildings, they are external to us, and what God really wants is our hearts – the very core of our being. "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts." This is about more

than intellectual assent to the doctrine of the church. This is about how we perceive the world around us, the motivation behind our every decision and action, this is about how we live in relationship with one another, with God's creation, and with God.

Here's the part I don't understand in today's lesson. If this is all about relationship, how can God's covenant be written on our hearts without our consent? I mean, I suppose God can do whatever God wants, but it doesn't mean we will reciprocate. If we are hard hearted, like the judge in the gospel lesson, how can God reach our hearts?

Christian missionary and mystic Sundar Singh once said, "While sitting on the bank of a river one day, I picked up a solid round stone from the water and broke it open. It was perfectly dry in spite of the fact that it had been immersed in water for centuries. The same is true of many people in the Western world. For centuries they have been surrounded by Christianity; they live immersed in the waters of its benefits. And yet it has not penetrated their hearts; they do not love it. The fault is not in Christianity, but in men's hearts, which have been hardened by materialism and intellectualism."

Singh knew that a hardened heart is impenetrable. And yet, the judge's heart was penetrated. The persistence of the widow broke down the judge's defenses, just like Joshua and his army broke down the walls of Jericho and just like the Babylonians broke down the walls and temple of Jerusalem. What if God is the widow in the story? What if the way to our hearts is the desolation and destruction of our institutions and our buildings, as it was for the Israelites of old? What if our hearts really aren't impenetrable at all? All it takes is persistence, and who is more persistent than God? What if? I wonder.

“The days are surely coming,” says the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with my people. 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.” And we will live and behave as though God is Lord of our lives, and not Doug Ford or Mark Carney or any other political, business, or ecclesiastical leader – we will internalize God’s perspective, God’s priorities, God’s vision for creation, God’s sense of justice and grace and compassion, and we will live lives of peace and joy in heaven on earth. I can hardly wait.