

“Jeremiah Might Have Been a Baptist”

Jeremiah 31:31–34

Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman

First Baptist Church, Raleigh

March 21, 2021

We have all heard the jokes that start with, “You might be a Baptist if...” For example, you might be a Baptist if you think God’s presence is strongest in the back three pews... if you think preachers who wear robes are in cahoots with the communists... if you believe you’re supposed to take a covered dish to heaven when you die... if you can quote Robert’s Rules of Order but not the Ten Commandments... if you’re certain that Jesus and the disciples ate fried chicken at the Last Supper... And the list goes on and on.

I have often thought Jeremiah might have been a Baptist, had he lived in another time, not for any of these reasons but for a few more substantive ones. He has fire in his belly, an ability to raise his voice, a capacity for righteous indignation. He has a tendency to get grumpy, act like he’s got a chip on his shoulder, have a dark view of the world. And he can get stuck on a theme, dig in his heels no matter what. But most of all, he believes in a very personal kind of faith that not only requires responsibility but begins with an intimate relationship with God.

Nowhere is this latter reality seen more clearly than in today’s reading from Jeremiah 31. In fact, nowhere in scripture is there a more compelling description of a personal way of relating to God. “The days are surely coming,” says the Lord in this text, “When I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.” It will not be like the old covenant, the text continues, God will put God’s law within the people, God will write it on their hearts. No longer will they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” because they will all know God, from the least of them to the greatest. And God will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

It sounds like a foreshadowing of Christian faith, a vision realized in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, even if it has other applications for Jewish people. But it also sounds like the faith of the

reformers, including Baptists. They believed in a very personal kind of faith, an intimate way of relating to God. They believed in the priesthood of all believers, in a faith that is shared equally by all followers of Jesus. And their beliefs shape ours to this day.

So, there is a lot here that feels very familiar which shouldn't strike us as being all that odd because we are talking about the same God. The God of Jeremiah is the God of and in Jesus, the God of the reformers, and the God we worship today. And this is the way God has always sought to relate to women and men.

It begins with a very personal kind of connection. "I will put my law within them," God says, "I will write it on their hearts." This is what is different about this covenant, as compared to the ones we have considered in the Hebrew canon earlier this Lent. God speaks in this text about making a new covenant with the people, not like the one God made with their ancestors, but the newness lies not in the content of the relationship nor with the expectations God has of the people, but of the personal nature of the relationship, the internalization of the covenant. "I will put my law within you," God says, "on your hearts."

English playwright David Edgar used this phrase as the title for his play about the Reformation written on the occasion of the four hundredth anniversary of the King James Version of the Bible. "Written on the Heart" is the title of this fascinating play that was premiered by the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Swan Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon but was also performed by Burning Coal Theater right here in Raleigh. The play explores not only the challenges of getting the Bible into the language of the people so that they could read it for themselves, but also the larger challenge of freeing each person to relate to God in his or her own way. The author views that movement to have been encapsulated by Jeremiah's phrase — written on the heart.

What we are talking about is an internal sense of what God desires, of right and wrong — something like conscience. God puts this sense within us. But more than this, God puts God's own self within us such that we know God in an intimate way, not simply as an external Being out there somewhere. God is as near to us as the beating of our hearts.

Thirteenth-century German mystic Meister Eckhart put it this way: the eye with which I see God is very same eye with which God sees me. This doesn't mean I am God. It means that a part of God lives within me and each of us can thus relate to God in an intimate way. This teaching got Eckhart in trouble with the Church of his time which wanted to have control over people. Affirming each person's ability to connect with God threatened the Church's authority. But it freed each person, it empowered each person to relate to God.

It is a teaching that squares with the Baptist form of Christian faith. In the reading from John, some Gentiles come to the festival wanting to see Jesus. We believe not only that we have seen Jesus but that the Spirit of the Risen Christ lives within our hearts. We talk of our daily walk with God, meaning we sense God's presence with us. It is not something we can prove, but it is real, and it is an awe-inspiring gift — to be in intimate fellowship with the Creator of the universe.

In the book *Mister God, This Is Anna* the author describes his relationship with a young girl he adopted who had an incredibly intimate way of relating to God. Anna was her name, and the first night she stayed with him, she knelt down to pray, saying, "Mister God, this is Anna talking," and she went on talking in such an intimate way that the author got the eerie feeling that Someone was looking over his shoulder.

Most of us have had that feeling at some point, the sense that we are not alone because God is with us. God's law is written on our hearts, God's Spirit dwells deep within us, our faith is very personal.

It is also non-hierarchical; as each of us relates directly to God, none of us has access to more than anyone else. "No longer shall they teach one another," Jeremiah says, "or say to each another, 'Know the Lord,'" for they will all know God from the least of them to the greatest.

It sounds very Baptist, at least in the historic sense. Some who claim our name have sold their birthright in this time, giving far too much authority to pastors. There is a role for leadership in Baptist ecclesiology, even ordination, and we still need teachers along the way, but in terms of our basic standing before God, we are all equal. The ground is level before the cross.

The inimitable leader of the Baptist Joint Committee, James Dunn, once put this way in response to the 1988 SBC resolution on the authority of the pastor. “The term ‘ruling pastor’ is an oxymoron,” James said, “and anyone who doesn’t understand that is just an ordinary moron.” It’s a little blunt but still accurate.

I have often said that we need a free pew as much as a free pulpit. The pulpit has to be free for the Gospel to be proclaimed, but people hearing a sermon must be just as free to think for themselves. Our discernment of the divine intent, including the message of any given biblical text for our time, is a shared endeavor, not simply the purview of one person behind a pulpit. For most of us who preach, it is liberating to know that our hearers take their responsibility for discernment seriously.

I have joked that there are two reasons why I am not an Episcopalian priest, even though I admire the liturgy and many courageous stances of the Episcopal church. First, I have bad knees, perhaps because of all the competitive running I have done, I just couldn’t handle the kneeling. Second, I don’t like the hierarchy because, as I understand it, you don’t start out at the top.

It is a jovial statement, but the latter part is true, for a different reason. I don’t like the hierarchy because it goes against the part of Baptist identity I value the most. We are all equal in God’s eyes. We all relate to God directly. We are all priests to and for one another. Jeremiah anticipates this perspective.

Our faith, like the one of which Jeremiah speaks, is very personal and non-hierarchical. It is also unconditional and non-transactional. I have argued throughout this series on biblical covenants that every covenant is shaped by grace, and that is so, but this new covenant Jeremiah speaks of moves grace to the center of the Divine-human encounter. It’s not just a matter of ending with the statement, “I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more,” though this is significant. It’s a matter of a personal relationship forming the heart of the covenant instead of a set of obligations.

While previous covenants relied on grace, the people’s faithfulness or lack thereof determined whether they were close to God or far away.

In this covenant, even in their worst moment, God is still right there, the law of love is still written on their hearts, God is their God and they are God's people. It still matters how they live, but their choices do not affect God's love. It is unconditional. It does not depend on them.

Perhaps this was always the case. Perhaps it is their understanding that has changed. But it is a significant change, nonetheless, and one that squares with Christian teaching. We believe that we are saved by grace alone. As the author of Hebrews puts it, Jesus' suffering love becomes the source of eternal salvation for all who are connected to him. We still have responsibility. Jesus says in the reading from John that we have a calling to follow him in a path of suffering love, but this calling is a response to grace, not an attempt to earn God's love.

We know this, but knowing it in our heads and being willing to accept grace at the core of our being are two different things. I think of the monk in the Zeffirelli film "Brother Sun, Sister Moon" who prays repeatedly through tears, "Father, forgive me. Father, forgive me. Father, forgive." Francis of Assisi touches him gently on the shoulder and says almost dismissively, "I think he heard you the first time."

We have much more trouble accepting grace than God does in giving it. We can even turn our belief into just another kind of obligation or transaction — the thing we have to do just right in order to know God's love. But God loves us when realize it and when we do not, when we accept it and when we do not, when we have faith and when we do not. God's love has no conditions — none!

Jeremiah wasn't a Baptist, of course, but he might have been, if he had lived in another time. And his words have spoken to Baptists over the centuries — words about personal faith, level ground and unconditional love. May they continue to speak to us today, may they shape the kind of community we share, and may they guide our witness to the world that is full of people who need to know that it is possible to relate to God in this way.