

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA

The Fifth Sunday of Lent: March 17, 2024

Written on Your Hearts

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Good morning and welcome to Christ the Lord Church on our last Sunday of Lent. Next week we will have Palm Sunday and begin Holy Week. Interestingly enough, our Old Testament reading focuses on a new covenant, and as Lent closes and we look toward our new beginning in Easter, let us look at that new covenant in which we take part.

Let's begin with the Old Covenant - the one made on Mount Sinai after God had led the people out of the slavery of Egypt. Its basis was the Law, the Ten Commandments written on stone, which parents were to teach diligently to their children. We have read the most common form of these laws every Sunday morning during Lent.

Some features of the Old Covenant will remain, as God will continue to be the initiator of the covenant which is rooted in God's gracious action on behalf of adopting, accepting and forgiving his people. The Law will remain as the norm for living as God's people, but just as the list of laws contain ways to be good within society, the goal will continue to be the same: to love God and to love your neighbor as God's chosen people in the world.

This is where we first hear Jesus' reply to the question "which is the greatest commandment?" "To love God with everything you have and to love your neighbor" is, as we know, not a simple thing. For those Israelites

wandering in exile, weary and losing faith, I am sure they had no idea that generations later, Jesus would someday create a community that would adopt these two commitments and form what we now call church.

What then is new about the “new” covenant? First, the new covenant involves a metaphysical surgical procedure - the re-writing of the human heart. The biblical understanding of the “heart” is that it is the center of human intellect and will, knowing what is right and having the desire to do it. Under the old covenant, the Ten Commandments (written on tablets of stone and posted for all to see) must be learned, memorized, and retained in the heart and mind.

So I want you to see in your imagination a tablet of stone vs. someone’s heart; then we will add intellect and will as it was known. One of these is not only breakable, but it is as we say, “written in stone.” It is unmovable, and unchangeable and hard to change with the times. The heart, on the other hand - well, let’s just say it can be moved, stretched, and inspired; the human intellect and will can grow.

Another important item in God’s new covenant is a generous forgiveness that wipes the slate of the past totally clean. From the least to the greatest, “I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more”. We often forget that the dilemmas of the Old Testament are often embodied in the wisdom and life of Jesus. Are you surprised that Jesus was living out the new covenant from generations past?

We often place tight limits on forgiveness, just as Peter asked Jesus how many times we forgive those who wrong us, “seven times?” Jesus, reflecting a new covenant kind of forgiveness and corrected Peter, “No...seventy times seven.” This forgiveness is generous and extended to all, from the wretched and despised to the great and the honored. How else do you love God and neighbor?

I will say most people, including atheists, know the basic laws of what is right and wrong. Yes, they are taught to us, but even so, there is that inescapable bothersome feeling when you have done something wrong, and even more so when you have done it on purpose.

And just what is the difference between an atheist who happens to just do good for the sake of doing good? There is absolutely nothing wrong either way. However, someone who has the new covenant and Jesus in their heart, not only does what is right because it is the right thing to do, but also feels God’s love in return.

We might get a cheap thrill helping someone. We have all experienced that, and after a bit we know it is quite hollow. But to help another, to serve another because you feel you have received love and wish to return love, is what having faith is all about. Therefore, acts of justice, forgiveness and love are not just rote works, but rather works of exchanging the love we have already experienced in Christ.

Our hearts and minds are programmed to basically be good people, and I mean that barring weird circumstances or mental health issues, for all

common purposes we all try to be decent people. So why would we need the commandments? Why would we need our hearts to have morality written on it?

Everyone knows the old saying "Laws are meant to be broken." This would be referring to our tablet of stone. However, upon consideration, if the law is love thy neighbor, if that is the intention of the action, it pretty much stands as changeable with circumstance if necessary.

Although we confess that Jesus fulfilled the new covenant in his life and ministry, the promise of the new covenant has not been fully realized in us. We continue to wrestle with our old sinful hearts. We still need our teachers and preachers. We struggle to distribute forgiveness beyond our small and limited doses. Jeremiah's new covenant remains a hope, but it is a hope that is underway and a hope that is certain to arrive fully in God's good future: "the days are surely coming, says the Lord, the days are surely coming."

And our last set of Lenten questions to wrestle with this week are: When you do something good, are you exchanging the love modeled and given to you by Christ? Are you ready to break the rules of stone and expand your ideas of compassion and love? What would it look like to live in a new covenant with God as creator, not as rule maker?

And so we end our Lenten journey prepared for the true new covenant. Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen