

Journeys of Love: Thinking Differently
Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Hebrews 5:5-10
First Presbyterian Church, Sarasota
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Rev. Glen Bell

We make it hard. Without meaning to, you and I make it hard.

We are welcoming more new members to our church today. I am pleased and grateful for the numbers of people who are discovering this congregation to be engaging and vital, warm and welcoming.

This group of new members includes Charles and Vera and Sam, Zoey and Carter, Olivia and Elijah. Some of them are in middle school and elementary school; some of them are just walking or almost just walking.

But we make it hard, I'm afraid. Without at all meaning to, we Christians sometimes act as if everything is settled, everything is certain. Our practices and ways of being are established and settled. We believe that "Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and forever." And if we are not careful, we act as if our faith and our church are also unchanging. This makes it hard for new members.

This is especially difficult for us Presbyterians. Like our sisters and brothers the Methodists and Episcopalians and others, we value tradition. We are conservators of the past, with a deep sense of history and continuity. We yearn to take what has come before and to preserve the very best of it, to give it evergreen energy and color, to make it new once again.

But sometimes we fail. Sometimes we just want it all to be the same as it ever was. At worst, it becomes about routine and comfort.

In the face of all this knowledge and self-reflection, we listen again today to God's Word. And thanks be to God, the Word bring us up short.

The prophet Jeremiah begins with a bang. "The days are surely coming," he proclaims, "when I will make a new covenant with my people." It will not be like the old covenant, not with laws and guidelines inscribed on tablets of stone, brought down by Moses from Mt. Sinai, no. Instead, God announces, I will place my presence within them. My Holy Spirit will dwell in them. My divine self will guide them from the inside out.

If you and I are not careful, we turn this into more of the same – settled and certain. Oh, yes, we say, he's talking about Jesus, the Lord and Savior. He's talking about the Messiah. He's talking about the One who is the same, from the beginning of creation beyond its ending.

That's all true. But when we look at it that way, when we slip it into that easy theological category, we turn the newness of our faith into the old, the established. It's almost as if we are saying to Olivia and Elijah and Zoey and Carter and Charles and Vera and Sam, "We understand all this, just do and think and behave exactly the way we do."

No. We need to hear that the way God loves us and empowers us is new and vibrant and lively. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. God's mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning.

The thrust of newness is the same in our reading from Hebrews this morning. As Donald Senior, a biblical scholar, notes, "The letter to the Hebrews is unique . . . in the New Testament. The author leaves aside more familiar ideas and reflection about Jesus – including his resurrection and our faith in him – and instead portrays Jesus using extended metaphors of the Jewish priesthood."

Reading Hebrews invites us to stretch, to listen to a new way of understanding Jesus, to open ourselves to something beyond the familiar, the routine and the settled. Here we see Jesus as our great high priest, offering up prayers, with loud cries, on behalf of all those who suffer in our world. Jesus prays and cries for the families of those killed at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. Jesus prays and cries for the people of Syria, seven years devastated by war. Jesus prays and cries for the families of those killed by the collapse of the bridge at Florida International University.

Jesus is not only our Savior and Lord, but also our priest, interceding on our behalf before almighty God.

How do you and I welcome the newness of our faith? How do we keep our spiritual lives and religious traditions from becoming empty, unexamined, a hindrance rather than a help? There are three ways, I believe, three ways: what we experience, how we speak, and how we listen.

I invite you to move through the next fifteen days with spiritual depth and intentionality. Ask yourself, in the morning, at mid-day, at day's end, how do I see God at work here? How am I experiencing God's mercy and goodness in our world and in my life?

Mr. Rogers is one of our best teachers here. When you and I are overwhelmed by the news, in Parkland, in Syria, in Miami, we can remember what Mr. Rogers taught us. "When I was a boy," he said, "and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.'"

As we see school students leading protests and demonstrations, school students traveling to Tallahassee and Washington to work for gun safety and security, we experience God at work in the world. As we see White Helmets and others volunteering in Syria to rescue the wounded and protect the children, we experience God at work in the world. As we see first responders put their lives on the line to treat and assist those devastated by the pedestrian bridge collapse, we experience God at work in the world.

We become more than we are, we become more than we ever dreamed we might be, as the power of God works within us.

How we speak is as important as what we experience. In these next fifteen days leading up to Easter, ask yourself these questions. How is God saving me now? How is God delivering me now? How is God empowering and strengthening me now?

Then, give yourself permission to share your story. Frame your words, your testimony, your perspective, by the powerful, redemptive forces you recognize around you. Speak about those you see who are both talking the talk and walking the walk.

Finally, how we listen is as important as what we experience and how we speak. Pay attention to the voices we often overlook. Listen carefully to the individuals who are often underrepresented and even silenced – women, people of color, members of the LGBTQ community, the poor or the homeless. Listen carefully to them.

And let me name one of the most important groups of all: those beyond the church. Those who have not yet discovered the goodness and mercy of Jesus Christ. Listen carefully to their stories. Your witness will help them to know how deeply they matter to God.

You see, the church is not primarily for us, those of us who for days or decades have experienced the redeeming love of Jesus. We, the church, are primarily for others – the doubters, the deniers, the uncertain; the wounded, the wondering, the wandering. We are to live for them.

Today is the last day of South by Southwest, the great festival in Austin, Texas. South by Southwest, like Coachella or Lollapalooza, has become bigger than life. What started as a little

regional music festival now has participants from around the world focused on music, film, comedy, educational innovation and the environment.

Our youngest daughter would be ashamed but not surprised that I couldn't tell you anything about Pale Waves or Findlay, two musical acts who performed there a few days ago. But there was another event there five days ago. South by Southwest sponsored a conversation about faith.

Think about that. In the midst of a music and arts festival, what some might experience as a days-long celebration, they found themselves talking about faith.

I found the conversation fascinating. I was particularly engaged by the words of Ana Marie Cox. Ana Marie Cox is an author, columnist and culture critic; she's in her mid-40's. She's worked for MTV News, the New York Times Magazine, The Guardian, and The Daily Beast.

As she described it, she grew up the child of a devout atheist dad and a mother whose spiritual life was expressed in scarves and crystals. She found aspects of Christianity to be intolerant and exclusionary. Even amid her professional success, she became an addict and an alcoholic. In the midst of all the pressures, she attempted suicide. She woke up after trying to kill herself, and found herself thinking, "Nuts! I'll have to find a way to keep going."

Then, she said, she discovered God's presence, a presence that invited her to release her fears and surrender her life. She said, "I felt compelled to find a shape for that faith. And the story of the sacrifice of the God of the Christian Bible called to me."

"I started living for something bigger than myself," she said. "I realized that I'm not going to find hope in my own plans, but instead by trusting God."

That's it. That is the story of a genuine seeker, a person who was touched and delivered by God's ever-new mercies, but who had to find the words and the way and the people and the structure to help identify it all.

Sisters and brothers, there are dozens and hundreds of people in Sarasota and moving to Sarasota who are searching for meaning and purpose. Their spiritual journeys are long and winding. They have not yet reached home.

But they are searching. Without any routine or comfort, without full knowledge of God's covenant, without the settledness and certainty of faith, they are searching.

They need women and men who will listen to them, who will listen and love and welcome the doubters, the deniers and the uncertain, the wounded, the wondering, the wandering. We are called to listen.

This, I think, is how you and I begin to think differently, to welcome the newness of our Christian faith. We look around us for the ways we are experiencing God's mercy right now. We share our own stories, testifying how God is saving and rescuing now, delivering and strengthening now. And we listen wholeheartedly, always opening ourselves to those who are on the way.

Will you do that this week? Experience? Speak? Listen? To the glory of Jesus Christ. Amen.