

One of my seminary preaching professors believed it was good to bring a degree of nervousness into the pulpit. Such nervousness was to remind us both that we were proclaiming God's word, and the need for humility when doing so.

Over twenty-five years after that preaching class, I became the interim pastor of the same Pittsburgh church this professor had served in the 1950's. His study was now my study. I sensed his presence and recalled his advice on nervousness, and I discovered its source might have been the five words one read as one entered that church's pulpit. Engraved in stone, but only visible to the preacher, is this verse:

"Sir, we would see Jesus." It might seem a bit sexist in tone if one did not know it is a verse in today's Gospel reading. Translated as, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus," the words are a request made to the disciple Philip by a group of Jewish proselytes from Greece. What follows is a bit comedic, in that Philip goes to tell Andrew, then the both go to tell Jesus himself. From our lesson, the Greeks' never do see Jesus, but those Greeks' presence indicate Jesus' word has extended into the world, and prompts Jesus to note a turning point in his life.

Over his three years of ministry, beginning with his turning the water into wine at the wedding in Cana, Jesus has told his followers, "My hour has not yet come." In our lesson, we will hear him say his hour, his time, has come. He will use an analogy of a seed needing to be placed in the ground before bearing fruit, to speak of his pending death, burial, and resurrection. We will hear him say, *"when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself."* One senses this is how and when the Greeks will see him. Let us hear God's word to us in John 12:20-33:

²⁰Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. ²¹They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." ²²Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

²⁷"Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. ²⁸Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." ²⁹The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." ³⁰Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. ³¹Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. ³²And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." ³³He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

In an era of choice, would we not prefer the law of God to be on engraved tablets, allowing us to take them or leave them? With the world changing so rapidly, do we really want God's law permanently tattooed on our hearts? It seems invasive.

God gives no choice in the Jeremiah text. In a series of statements, God declares, "People, this is the way it will be."

- ❖ *I will make a new covenant...*
- ❖ *I will put my law within [you], and*
- ❖ *I will write it on [your] hearts; and*
- ❖ *I will be [your] God; and;*
- ❖ *you will be my people....*
- ❖ *I will forgive [your] iniquity, and*
- ❖ *[I will] remember [your] sin no more.*

Our lesson is in that part of Jeremiah's prophecy known as The Book of Comfort. The people have been chastised and exiled for their disobedience to God, particularly for chasing after other gods in violation of the first commandment. Now, God is rewriting the covenant to a more relational one in which belonging to each other is the core element. The "you" is plural, perhaps like the southern, "y'all": I will be your God and y'all will be my people.

God's declaration in Jeremiah has a universalist tone in that, both the least and the greatest are going to be on equal footing in knowing the Lord. *No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall **all** know me, from the least of them to the greatest.* As was suggested in our men's Bible study a week ago, this almost sounds like the end of education, but it is instead a statement of equality.

In biblical times, education was for the wealthy, and usually only boys. I sometimes refer to the Book of Proverbs as lesson plans for teaching the sons of the rich and famous about the ways of God, and how to treat lesser folks. It is more than a bit paternalistic. By contrast, Jeremiah's imprint of God's covenant will be placed on all hearts, not just those deemed worthy, wise, wealthy or well-connected – *"they shall **all** know me..."*

The heart is also the centerpiece of the portion of Psalm 51 we read as our prayer of confession. *Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit in me.* This psalm of repentance is attributed to King David, who wrote it upon the discovery of his affair with Bathsheba. Yet, the heart of David's sin is not just the affair, but his privileged abuse of power in arranging for Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, to be struck down in battle, so David could attribute her pregnancy to the deceased husband. Suffice it to say, David's heart needed a lot of purging with hyssop and scrubbing with Tide to make it ready to receive a right spirit.

In a devotion entitled, "Repentance," Kathleen Norris writes of how the honesty of the psalms are instructive for dealing with our own life struggles. [Norris, Kathleen, "Repentance," reprinted in Bread and Wine: Readings for Lent and Easter, Orbis Press: Maryknoll, NY, 2003, p. 4] She encourages our writing of our own psalms of repentance to help in the cleaning of our own hearts, so they will be a dwelling place where God's love and spirit can be implanted. As an example, Kathleen Norris tells of boy who wrote a poem called, *"The Monster Who Was Sorry."*

[The boy] began by admitting that he hates it when his father yells at him: his response in the poem is to [hurt] his sister, and then wreck his room, and finally wreck the whole house. The poem concludes with the boy saying: "Then I sit in my messy house and say to myself, 'I shouldn't have done all that.'"

Kathleen Norris reflects, *"My messy house" says it all: with more honesty than most adults could have mustered, the boy made a metaphor for himself that admitted the depth of his rage and also gave him a way out. If that boy had been a novice in the fourth-century monastic desert, his elders might have told him that he was well on the way toward repentance, not such a monster after all, but only human. If the house is messy, they might have said, why not clean it up, why not make it into a place where God might wish to dwell?*

If the house is messy, ... why not clean it up, why not make it into a place where God might wish to dwell?

As inheritors of the covenant relationship in which God's law and love is written on each human heart, we know there are times our words and actions tarnish the finish, and the heart becomes a messy, inhospitable place into which we are ashamed to welcome an indwelling God. Yet, God's law and love has been written on our hearts for a reason.

Let me pause here and take a moment to turn to a verse in our gospel lesson that may cause discomfort, or even go against our own beliefs. Jesus said, *Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.* In one sense this is either a "beat over the head" verse, used to chastise and control, or a "discard" verse we ignore because we believe one must love and respect one's self in order to truly love and serve others.

The full phrase, "hate their life in this world" helps me hear the teaching in a context with which I can deal. The life we are to lose, of which we are to let loose, is any part of our selves clinging to something alien to God. I would suggest such clinging is often related to power and money, domination and violence, insecurity and even the fear of not being in total control.

Knowing what is of God and what is alien to God is not always clear. Or, I would say it is not always clear about us, because we often have an uncanny ability to know what God wants for others and how they need to change. This can be at home or in our workplace, or even in international relations. We say or think, "I am so sure I know what God wants...for you to do or be."

John writes of God's voice coming from heaven but some thought it was angels and others thunder. I like what Rodney Whitacre writes about this, "There is ambiguity to everything divine in this world, and this ambiguity tests hearts." [Feasting on the Word Year B, Volume 2, Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, p. 145]

We are wise to begin with testing our own hearts. We may not say we love power and money, domination and violence, insecurity and the fear of not being in total control, but I think we recognize when they begin to lay claim to our hearts and minds, and shape our lives. We sense when they begin to cloud our vision. We know when it is time to do a psalmist's cleansing, a messy house cleaning, to make a place where God would wish to dwell. The good news is we have been there before, and we also have known times of restored vision, and sense our sight was actually originating from within our hearts.

For eighty years, preachers have entered that Pittsburgh church pulpit and read the words, "Sir, we would see Jesus." For the preacher, it is a challenging reminder the gathered hearts and minds are there to see Jesus, and to hear good news of hope.

Yet, beyond the church pulpit and Sunday preacher, I would each of us to consider the world in which we live to be a gathered congregation, and our own lives to be a pulpit. As such, we would hear this "wish to see Jesus" request posed to us each time we arise for the day, and as we walk out the door of our home; as we open the door of our cars or board a city bus; as we do our errands or visit a friend; as we enter our workplaces, or schools, or churches.

Perhaps it would help if we wrote on a pack of sticky notes, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus," but instead of "Sir," we use our own name. "Rick, we wish to see Jesus." We could put those sticky notes on the bathroom mirror and the coffee pot, on the doors we use to exit the house and the steering wheel of the car we drive, on our computer screens and our cell phones.

Having the law of God and love of Christ imprinted on our hearts is not a mark of individual worth or sign of personal salvation. It is a capacity within, we have been entrusted to let out, to reveal, to shine forth. "Rick, we wish to see Jesus," is a daily reminder for me of the trust a loving God has placed in me to show Christ's vision for justice and peace, for equality and hope.

