

Sermon

Living & Dying in the System

Bacon Memorial Presbyterian Church

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Our Old Testament lesson is from the prophet Jeremiah – who is generally pretty pessimistic and cranky honestly but in this passage he’s oddly optimistic, almost utopian. He claims God has made a new covenant with the Israelites basically because they broke the first covenant so God is establishing a new one. So the chief claim of this passage about God’s new days is that there will be a new covenant between God and the people. Now we mustn’t confuse a covenant with a contract – whereas one party does one thing and in return the other party does something else. The two parties are generally in some sort of partnership with one another – one is generally providing perhaps a service and the other party will provide payment for that service. Perhaps we can look at marriage – that’s a covenant of sorts, a promise to love and honor one another but the big difference is God is much more powerful than the people and sets the terms by which the two parties will relate. It does not require the weaker party’s consent or willingness, and there is no room for negotiation.

Now this new covenant is different in that it is not written on a tablet but is written, according to Jeremiah, upon the people’s hearts...I will be their God, and they will be my people. And God does this in such a way that “they shall all know me and no longer shall they teach one another”. So in other words, I should not be standing here – I should not be necessary. Now as I said, very utopian – wouldn’t it be wonderful if knowing God was as instinctual as breathing in and

breathing out. But as we all know, this prophesy has not really yet come to pass, at least not on our end of the bargain...

Our New Testament scripture from John's gospel where Jesus in a very poetic sense, foretells of His death and this stresses that the covenant that Jeremiah spoke of has certainly not come to pass. God has indeed been faithful so much so that God sent God's son to this world to envelop the love that God has for the people –for us. But there is a warning in this text, "Whoever serves me must follow me...Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out." The world that is referenced here in our scripture in this sense is not referring to the Earth, to God's creation, but is referring to the fallen realm itself – and I think we know what that looks and feels like – the estrangement from God that exists in the world and is organized in opposition to God's purposes. The world is embodied in institutions that seek to hold human beings captive and shape us into what it wants us to be. Dependent on their service, their product, their medicine, their function...moving us away from our covenant – moving us away from what is written on our hearts. When we read this passage carefully – the crucifixion is an exorcism in which this system is judged and the "ruler" is cast out by means of the cross.

You live in this system, so do I , so do our children. We are bombarded by the system all day everyday. You need this product to live, you need this medicine, you need to do this thing – you need to hoard your money, your resources, buy more, buy another one even though you have two just like it. Consumerism – it is everywhere – children are barraged with advertisement on their ipads and internet and television telling them how great this thing is and

they run to their parents or grandparents and beg for it, just like they were told to by the children who showed them how great the thing was on the tv. We have either ourselves or know people who have gotten into excessive debt buying things they didn't need or even really want – I know someone younger than me who has filed bankruptcy 3 times – for what I don't know – he doesn't have anything really to show for it but misery and emptiness trying to find fulfillment in vacations and stuff.

Violence – it is everywhere in the system. The “myth of redemptive violence” is the primary myth of the System. The way to bring order out of chaos is through violently defeating “the other”. How do we deal with enemies? We violently defeat them – how about Popeye – he ate his spinach and became strong enough to beat up Bluto. Video games and movies train children in this myth from a very young age. And many of us have trouble seeing an alternative to this lifestyle, thus showing how we remain captives of it.

Jesus makes it clear that His kingdom is not from our “system”. If it were, the disciples would have been fighting to free Jesus but Jesus replies to Pilate's question, “My kingdom is not from this system. My kingdom is not from here.” Jesus rejected violence which is precisely what distinguishes our world from His. Jesus exposes the system on the cross – that our way of life, is but an opponent of God's purposes; not the way of life but the way of death. Jesus exposed the system in this moment allowing us to be set free from its captivating ways. We are set free to die to a life shaped by the System, in order to live fully and freely in the way of Jesus.

Violence – like the shootings at the spas in Atlanta this week –these acts expose the system for what it is and thus makes it weaker But only if we, who are in covenant with God and follow Jesus and all he stood for, stand against these acts of hate and death. “Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.” When we give into the system, we deny Jesus – we deny the cross. But when we stand with love and justice, when we say no to the forces of this world that pull us away from the ways of Jesus, we move toward light and life. Living within consumerism, living in violence whether it be physical or verbal, is living in the darkness and emptiness. The disciples will be “delivered up” to forces of evil. They will be asked to drink the same cup Jesus drinks, to carry the same cross, to make the same absolute surrender – not to evil, but to God.

As we travel closer to the cross this Lenten season, take time to notice how the system has effected you and how often it is changing your heart and turning you away from God, turning your children, your grandchildren.

“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.”

Amen