

Jeremiah 31: 31-34 Heart Transplant

Perhaps the title of this sermon came more from the psalm for the day than the other texts. The psalm where the psalmist pleaded for God to create within him a clean heart, to put in a new and right spirit within. Although the Jeremiah text also has something to say about God's plans to implant something within the people. This idea of planting, implanting or transplanting is often described in scripture as being a body part. Many of you know that my husband received a heart transplant which was successful in the short term—really the transplanted heart was not the issue as Wayne's health deteriorated later, a deterioration related to the medications used to keep that transplant in place. That Wayne received a donor heart when he did was essential to his life continuing in the sense that the heart is one of those crucial organs without which we cannot survive biologically. His own heart was functioning at only about 6-8% and was becoming even less functional just before his transplant. Modern medicine and technique have advanced so that we can visualize these internal biological features, their connections and functions and their relationships to our ability to survive. With this knowledge it is now possible for medical teams to actually transplant organs from one individual to another—kidneys, lungs and hearts. The medications given to keep the organs from being rejected have improved so the success rate percentage wise and the duration have gone up markedly. Yet, although the different heart Wayne received allowed him to continue living, and living a fairly active life—it wasn't actually a new heart—and it did not change him internally in the way that our scripture talks about the new heart God gives. And if you think about it, the physical heart was not the part of us human beings that was being addressed by the prophet. The Hebrew words for the phrase translated is not easily conveyed by a single word translation—although that is what is used here in the text I read. The NIV translation converts the “within them” to “in their minds”, and again uses heart in the second portion of God's operation. But a Hebrew lexicon or dictionary gives a more appropriate sense of the word—the place where God plans on putting his law is the seat of vitality; it will be placed into the inner being of those who have been claimed under the covenant. A list of suggestions for the translation of this Hebrew word include the following: Heart, mind, inner self, seat of vitality, feelings and impulses, character, disposition, conscience, interior, organizing power of life. The prophet Jeremiah certainly did not have in mind the modern miracle of organ transplantation, nor did the psalmist who pled for a new, a clean heart. So when we consider Jeremiah's revelation of God's intent to write the Law on hearts, to place it within the covenanted people, what does that mean for us and our lives? How do we understand God's operation to place the Law within? What does it mean in terms of how we live, because obviously God expects this internally placed Law to change the behavior of the covenanted people? First we need to consider what it is that is going to be written, what will form the basis of what we know about God. This is important because God tells us this operation will result in our knowing God. Torah, God's Law is more properly translated as instructions or teachings. It is meant to teach people how to live in harmony and stability, to recognize God's vision of what ought to be according to God. God says: I will put my law within them. The law, the content of the covenant by which people are to live will not be changed. It seems that Jeremiah is promising

that God is going to establish a new kind of experience for us in our relationship with God—this experience will be that of being more in tune with God’s vision of ourselves and our society. In this new covenant people will know by an internal vision created by the law what God’s vision for human behavior is. In this relationship, since we know God more intimately, we will know the covenant promises we have made to God in response to God’s claiming. What this text is saying is that as claimed children of God, we are called to align ourselves with God’s vision of how the world should function. Our alignment with God’s vision is not externally imposed through moral law, no matter how right and useful that may be; but our alignment with God’s vision comes from the dynamic movement of God through the Holy Spirit within and around us. Christ’s spirit constantly speaks. God in Christ came to dwell among us, in our midst. Christ is risen. We celebrate this in two weeks. The Spirit sent at Pentecost to guide us is still present and active in our world. The writing of God’s Torah on our hearts, in our inner self is not an external reality, but an internal truth. In that way we “know” God intimately and experience heartfelt grace and companionship throughout all our days whether that day is sunny or rainy, calm or stormy. The promise contained within the old covenant from God is the same with this new covenant: “I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” Just the offer of a new beginning with God tells us that God forgives, that God’s love is steadfast and enduring. The old covenant was kept by external means—the law God gave was interpreted by regulations for behavior. Obedience to the law could be seen externally through compliance with regulations. In the world that is normative for us, regulations are needed but often seem insufficient. They are insufficient because the world is broken and only the alternative world presented in God’s vision can bring wholeness, healing, reconciliation—all those things we yearn to see. The regulations of the world even those based on God’s instructions have motivations designed to ensure their effectiveness. Many of the motivations are based on fear—fear of punishment causes many people to do the “right” thing. The feeling of guilt which comes after failing to do the “right” thing keeps many from repeating those things. Those who violate the accepted “norms” are made to feel guilty. Violations of behavior which are hurtful should lead to guilt. Guilt which leads to confession and resolution of “wrong” actions is necessary, but unresolved guilt instead often leads to shame which leads to self devaluation. This is a denial of God’s message that you are so loved and valued that he came and died for you. Sometimes the regulations are framed so as to provide a reward for correct behavior. All of these motivations for moral behavior—punishment, guilt, reward—come under the general rubric of the law—that old covenant that Jeremiah talks about. The problem with all these motivations is the same...they may sometimes change outward behavior...but they don’t change the inner person...they don’t change the human heart. What is expressed in this new aspect of covenant of which Jeremiah is speaking is God’s desire for relationship with people, for being a presence in the lives of claimed people. In this text God is shown to be desiring and looking forward to a time when we are told that “all shall know me, from the least to the greatest.” This word from God through Jeremiah brought those who heard it a message of hope—an audacious hope that they could be changed from the inside out. This changing of the human heart is where our hope also lies. If our hearts, minds, inner selves—whatever image works for you—are brought into alignment with God’s vision—God’s heart—then there won’t be any need for

regulations because hearts are changed. The Jeremiah passage connects our ability to be in synch with God and God's vision with the realities of divine forgetfulness and forgiveness. When we know the Lord, we also know what the text reveals "for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more, says the Lord" This is framed as God's word—God's promise. New possibilities for living emerge when we are forgiven –and know it. Jeremiah tells us that when God writes the law on our hearts we will do the right thing because we desire to do the right thing in order to be in that close relationship with God who loves us and forgives us. Jeremiah's dream is of nothing less than the inward transformation of the human being. Like Paul, the image is of a new creation through Christ's presence. If we are to experience the transformation brought about through this alignment of our vision of the world to match what God envisions, then our response needs to be one of confession, repentance and openness to becoming a new creation. With this changed vision the way we interact with the world and with others must be different. We must embrace a new orientation in life, be willing to leave behind preconceived notions about others, and be open to accepting our implicit participation in forms of injustice because of our silence on matters of concern to God. Cynics will scoff, but although the new creation will remain imperfect while in this broken world, major transformations can happen when we seek to discern God's vision for how this would was meant to be...how we were meant to be. When Jeremiah's text begins with these words: "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant", the days which are being spoken of are not the end days, not some vision of a distant time and place called heaven. Instead they are the days when you and I are living; when we are baptized into the covenant through God's claim upon us; when we begin to walk on the pathway of discipleship to the One who died and is risen because God's vision for the world is an alternative to the way of the world the world proclaims as reality. These are the days when God has written upon hearts that we are called to love one another as God has loved us. That is the call of Christ upon our lives to be the best new creation that we can be with our transplanted heart which sees the world through God's eyes because of God's presence within. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.