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“From Least to Greatest”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time/National Children’s Sabbath (Year C)

October 25, 2013

Jeremiah 31:27–34; Psalm 139:1–6, 13–16; Luke 18: 1-8

Time With Children:

“From Least to Greatest”

Jeremiah is a prophet in the Old Testament, who spoke God's word

to the people of God when they were going into exile.

And sometimes his words are harsh and punishing,

and at other times, his words are comforting and encouraging.

But I think it's interesting that Jeremiah uses the phrase “from the least to the greatest”

in his book more than any other writer in the bible.

Six times he uses it!

Some of those times he uses it in a harsh way, like

“from the least to the greatest, all are greedy for gain” (Jeremiah 6:13, 8:10).

And some of those times, he uses it to bring comfort and assurance to God's people, like

“from the least to the greatest, if you stay in this land, I will build you up,

and not tear you down; I will plant you and not uproot you” (Jeremiah 42:8).

And then in the passage that Camille read for us today, God says,

“I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel...

I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.

I will be their God and they will be my people.

And they all will know me, from the least of them to the greatest.”

(Jeremiah 31:33-34a)

And I wonder what Jeremiah means when he says, “From the least to the greatest,”

we all will know God?

Do you think he means from the smallest to the tallest?

*If we were to arrange ourselves like that, who would be the smallest here,
and who would be the tallest?*

Is God promising to be our God, from the smallest to the tallest,
so that we all will know God from the inside out?

Or, I wonder if Jeremiah means from the youngest to the oldest, we all will know God?
*If we were to arrange ourselves like that, who would be the youngest here,
and who would be the oldest?*

Is God promising that we will all know God, from the youngest to the oldest?

Or maybe when Jeremiah says that we all will know God, from the least to the greatest,
he means from the least innocent to the most innocent.

I don't think we'll arrange people like that up here.

But the message that God wants Jeremiah to say to us is this:

Yes, we all belong to God. Yes, Jesus loves us all.

Yes, we are all God's people, from the least to the greatest,
from the smallest to the tallest,
from the youngest to the oldest,
from the least powerful to the most powerful,
from the most innocent to the least innocent,

God is our God, and we are God's people... all of us!

We are all included and welcomed as members of God's family.

And now, some of our medium-sized members of God's family are receiving bibles
this morning from the church.

We have been eating breakfast together this past month, and talking
about the many ways God has blessed us, and made us to enjoy doing many things.

And we have made bags to carry our new bibles in, that have our names on them,
and pictures of the things we enjoy doing most.

So, as I call your name, please come forward and receive your new bibles
with the blessing of this congregation, so that you can continue
to grow in wisdom and stature and knowledge of God
from the inside out.

Time With Youth:

"Ho Hey!"

I wanted you to hear the prequel to the text that the children heard about how God is announcing a new covenant with his people in exile. After all the dire proclamations of judgment, Jeremiah is bringing fresh words of comfort from God.

This is a classic prophetic text, one we had to memorize in seminary.

It basically says that into the darkest night comes the brightest light.

Into the darkest night of exile, homelessness, displacement, despair, and death comes these words promising God's unconditional love and recommitment.

The people of God do not have to do anything to claim this promise;

they just have to accept what God is extending to them—

that God will be their God, and they will be God's people.

Through Jeremiah, God is sending his people two messages of profound hope.

The first is this: the days are coming when people and their animals will be replanted in a homeland when the Lord will once again watch over them, when parents no longer will eat sour grapes, and their children's teeth be set on edge.

Instead, everyone will die for his or her own sin; whoever eats sour grapes, his own teeth will be set on edge.

Does this sound like good news to you?

Do you have any guesses or ideas as to what this means:

no longer will parents eat sour grapes,

and their children's teeth be set on edge?

Let me read you Eugene Peterson's translation of the same text from *The Message*:

"When that time comes you won't hear the old proverb anymore,

'Parents ate the green apples, their children got the stomachache.'

No, each person will pay for his own sin. You eat green apples,

you're the one who gets sick." (Jeremiah 31:29-30)

Does that make any more sense? Remember, this is supposed to be good news!

Any more guesses as to what this means?

Well, I think this means that the days are surely coming... but not here yet,
when you, your generation, will not have to pay for the sins of my generation.
So, let me give you a few examples of ways my generation's sins might have impacted you.
The days are coming when your generation will not have to go fight
and risk death or injury or PTSD because of a war that my generation stirred up.
The days are coming when you will not have to suffer from flu or whooping cough
or other illnesses because my generation did not see that you were vaccinated.
The days are coming when your dream for higher education is not deferred
because my generation made the cost of that education too high.

*Can you think of any other examples that are not about something your parents
might have done to you directly, but that an older generation might inflict
upon a younger generation that "sets your teeth on edge" or
"gives you a stomach ache?"*

Those days are coming, but they are not quite here yet, are they?

The other message of profound hope in this prophetic oracle is this:

God will write his law, his new covenant, on our hearts internally;
God will weave it into the warp and woof of our inmost being
so that we will know how to be God's people from the inside out
without even having to think about it.

It will be so internalized to us that doing God's will just will come naturally to us
like instinct.

And it will be second nature for us to know that God is our God,
and that we are God's people.

Do you know the song by the Lumineers called "Ho Hey?"

It's been stuck in my brain all week as I have been writing this sermon.

Do you know how the chorus of that song goes?

"I belong to you, you belong with me, you're my sweetheart.

I belong with you, you belong with me, you're my sweet (Ho!) (Hey!)"

It's a love song, but it could be God's love song to us!

The covenant has been renewed. The light is on in the darkness.

God, who knows us from the inside out, is making it possible for us also
to know God from our inside out—from our sweet hearts,
inscribed with his law of love. Thank you!



Time With Adults:

“From Least Towards Greatest”

“The time is coming,” the Lord tells Jeremiah, “when they all will know me,
from the least of them to the greatest.”

“The days are coming,” the Lord tells Jeremiah, “when I will forgive their wickedness
and remember their sin no more.”

The days are coming... but as my father was fond of saying, “They ain't here yet.”
Maybe the days of God forgetting all of our wickedness and sin are here already,
but the days of us knowing God,
not by memorizing the ten commandments,
not by knowing all the rules,
not by abiding by all of God's curfews and household codes,
but of all of us, from least to greatest, knowing God from the inside out,
from our inmost being, those days have yet to be realized.

This has been an irrational week in our nation, to be sure,
when it seems that internal terrorism has been holding us all hostage.
Our church's Day School, which has been in operation for over 30 years,
was under threat of having to close tomorrow, Monday,
because about half of our Day School children are government-subsidized,
and that subsidy was at risk of being withheld.

A lead article in Wednesday's *Herald Sun* noted that
Durham's only domestic violence and sexual assault shelter
was on the verge of being shut down, too,
because the \$350,000 of federal funding needed to sustain it
had been tied up by Washington.

(Keith Upchurch. “Domestic Violence center in danger of closing”, *The Herald Sun*, 10/16/13)

So, in the meantime, our most vulnerable citizens, women and children,

the least powerful in our culture, are put in a holding pattern
with the risk that they must possibly continue being hurt.

And if I were a young mother in that situation, I would want to give someone in
our government, someone in a position of great power,
a black eye for allowing such suffering to continue.

God's divine amnesia is nothing short of pure grace; human apathy to suffering is not.
One truly can be celebrated in the here and now each time we come to the font
and declare God's pardon;

the other need not be tolerated until those days of fulfillment surely come.

That's exactly what the widow, the spouseless wife, is doing in the parable that Jesus tells.
She's advocating for herself as a vulnerable, powerless woman who is up against
an unnamed adversary.

She wants this person of power, this judge,
to take up her cause against her adversary and vindicate her.

She is dependent upon this judge for protection and fairness,
or else she easily could continue being victimized, continue being hurt.

So, she keeps coming at him, again and again to solicit
the protection and justice which she seeks.

And if we were reading directly from the Koine Greek today, you would know that
this judge finally relents, not because he cares one iota about her,
but because he cares about his own personal safety
and is afraid that her continued belligerence towards
him will result in her giving him a black eye.

That's how the Greek reads.

He does the right thing eventually, but for all the wrong reasons.

From the least powerful towards the greatest power,
this widow *knows* the nature of God's justice in her innermost being,
and this "empowers" her to speak, threaten, menace, harangue the powerful judge
until he bends to her request.

The day is coming when God will bring justice for his chosen ones who cry out to him

day and night, but it ain't here yet.

In the meantime, who and how will faith be shown on earth?

Since this is our Stewardship Season, and the stewardship of our children

is one aspect of our caring for ALL of God's creation,

let me share some of the statistics coming out of North Carolina

that beg for the justice of God on behalf of the least of these

who cry out to him day and night.

- 25.6 % of our children in North Carolina now live below the poverty line
- A child is abused or neglected in North Carolina every 23 minutes
- 26.7% of our children in NC are not immunized against preventable diseases
- 702,000 of our children qualify for food stamps
- 28,310 children in NC are affected by the Head Start program's furlough
- 66% of our public school children in the 4th grade are unable to read at grade level
- 24.1 % of our high school freshmen will not go on to graduate
- 79 children in NC were killed last year by gun violence

(Data for NC as of 3/20/13, www.childrensdefense.org/cits.)

I could go on, but I don't know if that is necessary.

How are we called to be faithful in these circumstances?

How are we called to be good stewards, caretakers, of the least of these?

In the newsletter this week, I mentioned Mark Barden, the father of one of the children

killed as a result of gun violence at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in

Newtown, Connecticut last December.

Mr. Barden went before the Senate to advocate for increased background checks

on gun purchases and more common-sense solutions to gun violence.

He had his day in court, so to speak, and was sent home packing.

But this was his response to the Senate's failure to act upon his request:

"We'll return home now, disappointed, but not defeated.

We return home with the determination that change will happen—

maybe not today, but it will happen.

It will happen soon. We've always known this would be a long road,

and we don't have the luxury of turning back.

We will keep moving forward and build public support for common-sense solutions
in the areas of mental health, school safety, and gun safety.

We will not be defeated. We are not defeated, and we will not be defeated.

We are here now; we will always be here because we have no other choice."

Mark Barden is a childless parent, like the widow was a spouseless wife,
both lesser powers in the greater power structures of their worlds,
both pleading, pressuring, posturing, for God's justice to be done.

Rabbi Abraham Heschel once said, after participating in a Civil Rights march
alongside Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "I felt as though my feet were praying."
(*Christian Worship Resources for Children's Sabbath*, Children's Defense Fund, p. 36)

How might our hands and feet pray this day until that day of the Lord comes?

Will our hands pray as we write a letter to an elected official on behalf
of underserved children?

Will our hands pray as we increase our donations to local food pantries
that serve women and children?

Will our hands pray as we read with a child and run our finger across
each printed line and sound out difficult words, syllable by syllable?

Will our hands pray as we hammer a nail to repair a low-income family's home?

Will our feet pray as we walk into a meeting with a legislator?

Will our hands pray as we share what we can to keep our Childcare Center operating?

Jesus says that the new covenant is in his blood poured out for humanity,
in sacrificial service and love, in the greatest being like the youngest,
coming alongside the least powerful as one who serves. (Luke 22:20–27)

That day is surely coming, but it ain't here yet.

That promise is ours to claim.

But in the meantime, may we be empowered

by our internal knowledge of God to pray faithfully. Amen.