

The Law On Our Hearts
Rev. Gusti Linnea Newquist
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church
Fifth Sunday in Lent

Based on Jeremiah 31:31 - 34. *The Prophet's Hope for The Beloved Community*

Are those who have been liberated from oppression doomed to become oppressors themselves, once they are given the power to do so?

That is the question before us today.

For ancient Israel, the answer is an unfortunate yes. A once-exploited, enslaved population finds its freedom - led by the very hand of God, who covenants with them in the manner of a beloved spouse - and then blows it. Even in the very land God has given them. Even with a set of instructions on how to get it right.

That set of instructions - the Ten Commandments and then some - comes translated to us in English as "Law." A pejorative for many of us. "Pharisaic Legalism" we might scoff, in a supercessionist "New Testament view of God's grace and love" in contrast with the "Old Testament legalistic God."

But we would be wrong.

Torah is the Hebrew translated as Law, and *mitzvot* for the "commandments." A similar word in Buddhism would be *dharma*. In its deepest, purest sense implying the deep wisdom of the ancestors. The teaching of the elders passed down through centuries. The "practices," if you will of living in right relationship with God and with one another. So that no one need oppress anyone else any longer.

By the time of Jesus *Torah* has become an almost mythological entity. Something like *nirvana* or *heaven*. An existential experience of this right relationship with God and one another.

Jesus, himself, is said to be the incarnation of *Torah*. *Torah-made-flesh* might be one way to imagine his ministry.

Far from pejorative legalism, *Torah* is the wisdom of the wilderness God spent forty years instilling into the liberated people! *Torah* is delight! *Torah* is joy! *Torah* is justice! *Torah* is, in its best sense, the Beloved Community we all say we want to be.

And yet, like ancient Israel, we fail miserably.

Take these very United States of America, for example. Founded, in great part, by our very own Scotch-Irish Presbyterian ancestors fleeing imperial oppression in the British Isles. Forged in rebellion against tyranny, with this radical idea that all "men" are created equal and endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable rights. And they were right to do so!

A beacon of hope we have truly been in this country. At least for my ancestors. And many of yours. With a Statue of Liberty welcoming all who are tired and poor, wretched and tempest-tost, yearning to be free.

And yet ...

I do not need to remind you that this same founding displaced (to put it mildly - another word might be genocide) those who were already here. My own ancestors, for example, may not have owned slaves, but they sure did encounter indigenous populations in ways that are now literally legendary.

Perhaps you did not know - as I did not until recently - the role of the American revolution in perpetuating slavery. Or the role of the Second Amendment in maintaining slavery. Or the direct line from slave-catching to Jim Crow, to racial terror lynching to modern policing and mass incarceration.

You and I may just be learning these consequences of our nation's founding, but our Black Presbyterian siblings have known it all along. Like the prophet Jeremiah they have called us over and over again, century after century, to live fully into the love of God and love of neighbor we claim as *our* Greatest Commandments.

As with the prophet Jeremiah those pleas have fallen (mostly) on deaf ears. Entrenched power has become too self-serving. Money and military might are the only things that really matter. *Torah* is given lip service, at best, and even then the religious and political elite only point to the letter - and not the spirit - of the law.

And then they lose it altogether. The nation ends up utterly destroyed, from within and from without. And Jeremiah, with the people, lands in exile. Back in Egypt. The very land the people fled a millennium before.

This is not good news, I am afraid, on this Fifth Sunday in the Season of Lent, Two Thousand Twenty One.

If the prophet Jeremiah is right in our time - and I am afraid he very well might be - you and I are left with a stark choice: face the truth; change our hearts and minds; repair the damage that has been done. Or lose it altogether.

Remember. Repent. Repair. Or die.

What will our choice be?

People change for two reasons, says Steven Aitchison. Either our minds have been opened or our hearts have been broken.

The Equal Justice Initiative Community Remembrance Project guides us through both. *Remember honestly* the experience of enslaved people in your region, they say. And the ensuing trauma of Jim Crow. Including the history of racial terror lynching. So that your mind may be opened. And your heart may be broken. And you may begin to repair what damage has been done.

And so we have.

Our Social Justice Committee, endorsed by the Session, has partnered with the Equal Justice Initiative right here in the eastern panhandle to remember the 1884 lynching of Joe Burns. An overview of the story and the work of the Eastern Panhandle Community Remembrance Project Coalition was recently on display through the Berkeley County Arts Council.

Soil from the ground where Joe Burns was lynched is now part of the larger collection in the Equal Justice Initiative Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration. The name of Joe Burns is now etched in the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama. Images of this display will appear in our offertory later in worship.

Remembering is, however, just a first step.

The ultimate hope is to change the answer to that original question: are those who have been liberated from oppression doomed to become oppressors themselves, once they are given the power to do so?

The ultimate is *Torah on our hearts*, as the prophet Jeremiah proclaims. On the *other side* of despair. The ultimate hope is that *true* land of promise and plenty God has always wanted us to be: where we truly do know God *and one another* because we have repaired what has been so badly harmed and have joyfully joined the radically transformed way of life that is the very reign of God, on earth as it is in heaven. Where those who have been liberated from oppression are no longer doomed to become oppressors themselves because life in Beloved Community has become the very law of land.

In the meantime, we open our hearts to the Law of Costly Grace. *Torah* in all of its wilderness wisdom. That commits us to the wounded, in the beautiful words of the reading shared by Theo Janus. And commits us to walk with the forgotten. And commits us to fight on undaunted all the more.

Let the church say, Amen!