

Faith Mennonite Church
Fifth Sunday of Lent
March 25, 2012

“Writing God’s Word on our Hearts”
Jer. 31:31-34; John 12:20-33

How many things do you know by heart? Important dates of birthdays and anniversaries, passwords for electronics, words to a lot of songs, including hymns, ingredients and their exact proportions for favorite or frequently-made recipes, names (lots of names!), driving routes, professional vocabulary, procedures, and practices. (What are other things you know by heart?)

Increasingly we don’t have to remember things we (or our predecessors) routinely remembered in the past. Handheld devices, smart phones, and the internet now instantly call up millions, if not billions, of pieces of information and facts with a single key stroke, and that includes the Bible.

Precisely because we have such ready access to information and such an explosion of information, we need to evaluate like never before how to be judicious gate-keepers of this information. We need to make a concerted effort to decide what information we will live by and how we will let it shape us.

God’s words, spoken through Jeremiah that we recited in our Call to Worship this morning, We’re spoken at a time when most of history and culture was transmitted orally instead of in written text. God’s relationship to Israel was a personal, covenant-making relationship. God made promises to accompany and empower a small, enslaved band of people, and God asked for loyalty, fidelity, and trust in return. Much of what we have in the Hebrew Bible, not just Jeremiah, is a litany of all the times and ways that Israel broke their end of the covenant. They were not a very trust-worthy group of people. At times God is portrayed as angry, jealous, and even ready to obliterate them. Yet, the strongest image of God that emerges in the pages of the Hebrew Bible is a God of compassion, a God of unending love who keeps her promises even when those on the other side of the covenant do not.

Jeremiah 31:31-34 exhibits such a love:

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. 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. 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, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

“I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; I will be their God, and they shall be my people... for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.”

So how does this work in the information age? How does God get into our lives if God doesn’t tweet or have a Facebook page? How do we get to know God in a heart kind of way, not just following a divine rule book by rote, but so that our thoughts and actions truly reflect God’s ways?

As Christians we look to our sacred text, the Bible, as a revelation of God. We also look to the natural world for glimpses into the character of God. And we look to one another, both in conversation and in service to discern and deepen God’s ways within us.

But none of these things just happen. Neither the Bible, or nature, or our interactions with other provide easy answers, without some effort and struggle on our part. All require a dying process described in the

verses from John 12: 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.

What kind of dying do we need to do to allow God to write on our hearts?

When it comes to finding God in scripture, we may need to die a *few* times or in a few ways. First, we have to die to our embarrassment. We keep our distance from “Bible-believing Christians” because of the way that many people in our society use the Bible to clobber others. We’re embarrassed by literal interpretations and misinterpretations, especially when they’re used in the service of political campaigns. And frankly we’re embarrassed by the amount of violence, much of it attributed to God, that we find in the Old Testament. But we shouldn’t let such embarrassment keep us from interacting all the more seriously and energetically with the Bible. Which brings us to the second death: we need to die to our desire for a user-friendly Bible. The Bible will never be an easy book to read. It is ancient, written in several languages and cultural contexts, all foreign to us today. Opening ourselves and letting these words become written on our hearts requires both patience and perseverance to wrestle with the hard (and the not-so-hard) texts, learning to read and let it shape us “as if our lives depended on it.”¹ It would all be so easy if God did have a Face Book page, and would post status updates that we’d see as we scroll through the latest updates. (Well, actually I found a God page, but it didn’t look too authentic.) But letting God write on our hearts requires low-tech, old-fashioned real time conversation, like we give to the relationships that are dearest to us. I know that many of you have developed such practices. Orv & Cleta, how do you listen and how has it shaped you?

When it comes to finding God’s way in the natural world, we need to die to our desire to multi-task, to being efficient and productive. For to find God in nature, requires great attentiveness. Before I left on sabbatical, Aryn Baxter gave me a little travel notebook, with a Mary Oliver poem transcribed inside. The poem “Invitation” expresses both what is required and what we receive when we open ourselves to God through the natural world.

Oh do you have time to linger
for just a little while,
out of your busy
and very important day
for the gold finches
that have gathered
in a field of thistles
for a musical battle
to see who can sing
the highest note, or the lowest,
or the most expressive of mirth,
or the most tender?
Their strong, blunt beaks
drink the air
as they strive melodiously
not for your sake
and not for mine
and not for the sake of winning
but for sheer delight and gratitude--
believe us, they say,
it is a serious thing

¹ Ellen Davis, reference

just to be alive
on this fresh morning
in this broken world.
I beg of you,
do not walk by
without pausing
to attend to this
rather ridiculous performance.
It could mean something.
It could mean everything.
It could be what Rilke meant,
when he wrote:
You must change your life.

I've heard Gregg Richardson talk about the way he listens to music in words that are akin to Mary Oliver's "Invitation." Gregg, how did you learn to listen to music and how does it relate to listening to God?

Yesterday morning I had breakfast with a few women colleagues in ministry. It had been a few months since our previous meeting and we were having trouble recalling when and where, exactly, we had last met. All at once a memory got triggered for one of us and we could name the place and month of our meeting. Then another was able to remember the exact date. She then shared how a friend had commented that as they get older, they'll need to stick together because it will require the combination of everyone's partial recollection to build a complete memory!

Community is important for memory, for discernment, and for seeing God in new ways. Several people have been involved in service/ministry trips in the past couple weeks. I'm wondering what was written on their hearts through these experiences. (Cynthia Miller - Haiti; Teresa Wasick, Leslie Minkler & Andy Martinson - Minot, ND).

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with [my people]. ... 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. 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, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.