

**Sermon**  
**March 18, 2018**  
**Rev. Brian K. Dixon**  
**Jeremiah 31:31-34**

Most of you don't know me. I know your pastor Emily well and she knows me well. And I've spent many hours among many of you during some raucous trivia nights. But I wouldn't say we know each other. So, I want to tell you a little more about me, I grew up in the south. Particularly, in Florida-to which I know many of you would say Florida doesn't really count as the South but believe me it does. I grew up in Central Florida. My mother's family came from Alabama and my father's family were from the panhandle of Florida which if you know that area of the state you know that is really just lower-Alabama. I have an older sister and a twin brother. My brother and I were very different! I excelled in school—he did not. I had a lot of friends—he did not. I was into music—he was more into fishing and hunting. Me pasty and pale—him tan and dark complected. (I like to say he got all the melanin.) Him tall and skinny—well you get the picture. I went to college in the South and attended seminary at a prestigious Atlanta University that likes to consider itself an Ivy of the South. After living in Atlanta, I lived in San Francisco where the temperature is always between 60 and 80 degrees. I pastored a Baptist church—but not that kind of Baptist—This church welcomed gay people. This congregation started a non-profit that served immigrants and HIV+ men. The congregation was a dispensary for medical marijuana before it was legal. The city itself until recently has been a mecca for liberal and socially-progressive programs and thinking. Since 2012, I have been working for a Family Foundation and helping to distribute 5 Million dollars annually. I have done and am doing a lot with my life. I have learned a lot more than my family of origin ever did, and I have traveled more and done more and come farther than they ever did. I'm much more progressive than they are and much more aware of the world around us and really probably think a lot more about the underserved and disenfranchised people of the world than they do. It's just they haven't had the experiences I have. They stayed in rural Central Florida and I didn't. And that brings me to today. To this place. To this text.

Particularly this text from Jeremiah, with its promise of a new covenant that will be written on the people's heart. Oh yeah, one more thing about me. For the last few years I've been officiating weddings on the side. I work for an organization called Journeys of the Heart and we do weddings for couples who are looking for a non-denominational officiant for their wedding. I'm essentially a pastor for hire—sometimes I call myself something else, someone who takes money for providing a service, but I won't say that today. But I do my best to say words that I feel good about. During the ceremony, after the couple has exchanged vows and rings, I pronounce them married and say that they can seal their covenant with a kiss. It's what I've said for years, but as we know from pop cultures and often little girl's imaginations, and what most people believe will be said is "You may now kiss the bride." But I don't say that. Because weddings are different now than they once were. They once represented an exchange of property. A wedding represented an agreed upon contract between the groom and the father of the bride. The Bride was chattel to be purchased for a price. And "you may kiss the bride" is only a short step from "you may kiss your bride." She now belongs to you. And the priest served as arbiter and conferrer of that contract. There was very little that resembled love. And it was far from mutually agreed

upon. The men agreed to the terms of the contract and the women just went along. It is now, at least in the United States, an outdated understanding of what a marriage looks like and what a wedding represents. Even if people still use some of the same old practices, rituals, and words.

Jeremiah is talking about covenants. Not an old outdated covenant. Not one that was written on stone tablets by God, given to Moses, brought down from the mountain, and presented to the Israelites. No Jeremiah is talking about a new covenant. Because that first covenant was an epic failure! Jeremiah has been talking a lot about how the covenant has failed, how the people of Israel have not adhered to the terms of the contract. And so now because the people are such big ol' losers. They are paying the price. Their king has been carted off. The temple has been destroyed. The land is split up. The Israelites have nothing. And that is right where we find ourselves too. I for one am feeling these days like so much is not going right. We have leaders in power who are looking out for their best interests instead of those who have nothing. They are enacting policies that only will further disenfranchise the most vulnerable. Shootings are happening so quickly in our schools and in our streets it's hard to stay focused. Black lives don't matter. Women don't matter. Children don't matter. No one matters except the richest and most powerful. Our country is divided. Our world is divided. Our planet has been pillaged. And it is all our fault! We did this! And just like the Israelites we failed to listen and see the signs. This is what lent is all about. Recognizing just how awful we have become and how awful we are. Yay!

And yet, yet! That is not what this passage is about is it? No, the words prior to what was read today say that the day is coming when the land will come back together. God will watch as children and animals are born. God will watch as the people rebuild. Children will no longer have to suffer for the deeds of their parents. This is a story of hope. God is promising a new covenant. One that is built on mutuality. One in which people work together to rebuild a more just and loving society. And just as an aside, Jeremiah talks about the need for a new covenant because the Israelites did not live up to the requirements of the covenant. But it seems to me that there may be the need for a new covenant because the old one was never going to work. Is it possible that the one that instigated the old covenant, the one who wrote them on stone tablets also bares culpability in this situation? Much like we no longer say, "you may kiss the bride," God realized a new covenant was required in which all people were responsible. We humans need a covenant that is not based on a head knowledge, not a covenant written on stone, but a covenant written on our hearts. The covenant has to be deeply embedded in our being. Before we can prosper and thrive, before the land can come back to gather, before the wounds can fully heal, we must understand the covenant and live the covenant from a deeper place. I say, "you may seal this covenant with a kiss," because marriages are about two people coming together. Not to become one. But coming together as individuals. I also say during a wedding:

you are about to enter into a union which is most sacred and most serious: most sacred because it so deeply honors a union of love between two people and most serious because it requires of those who enter into it a complete and unreserved giving of self. It will bind you together for life in a relationship so close and so intimate that it will profoundly affect your whole future. That is a covenant. One that invites us to bring our full and total selves into the relationship. This new covenant that God initiates is not binding, it is liberating. It is one in which we can bring our whole selves in.

And while that feels really good, we also must remember that Jeremiah was not talking to individuals and God was not making a covenant with an individual but with a whole people. For this covenant to be fully realized it must be a covenant for all peoples. For Jews and Christians and Muslims. For Rohingyas. For liberals and conservatives. For Black and White and Brown. It must be a covenant for young and old. Not one in which groups are tolerated, but one in which groups are invited to be fully themselves. This week we saw a remarkable thing as youth walked out of their classrooms to stand up for safer schools and to remember their peers who had been killed both in that school in Parkland, but also in Newtown and in Richmond and in Columbine. In the past few years, we've seen women standing up and saying MeToo, taking to the streets. But let us not overlook the faces that are missing or who have been saying me too for far too long but have been ignored. I work with youth organizing groups, primarily black and brown youth, who have been advocating for safer communities and safer schools for a long time but have not had Oprah and George Clooney celebrating and singing their praises, that have not had parents showing up at school with donuts to support them. That have not been supported by principals and teachers. In the new covenant all faces must be a part. All faces must be loved and part of building a new beloved community. Not condescended to, not patronized. All faces must be equal.

And that is why we keep going through lent over and over and over, because that new covenant is not yet. I am still holding myself up and my liberal ideas up as what is to be achieved. I am still saying I'm not judging those who live in rural areas or those who are not educated, but you and I both know that I am. This week marks the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of my twin brother—we were so different, but it was only after he was gone that I realized how my condescension and arrogance prevented me from seeing the ways we were the same. Last year, the foundation I work for brought together our grantees and invited John Powell, an expert in civil liberties and civil rights and racism and structures of oppression. Professor Powell says that the biggest challenge of our day is that of othering versus belonging. We spend most of our lives othering, setting ourselves up against the other. We all do it. And the new covenant, the one that is promised is one of belonging, where we all belong. All of us. Next Sunday we start the week-long march to the cross, and we begin with a big parade in which I don't know about you, but I always imagine myself as one of the ones welcoming the messiah and maybe I would have been, maybe you would have been. But there is also a very good chance that we would have been one of the ones viewing the whole situation with disdain and condescension. As too emotional, too rural, man on a donkey?! Before we get to the parade, let us take one last moment to consider the ones who we are othering, the ones who must be welcomed before a new covenant can be realized. Those Israelites had to be forgiven and had to forgive, let us today consider if we too are in need of forgiveness and who we need to forgive.

Despite all of the ways that we need forgiveness and need to forgive, there is still hope. In the midst of chaos, death, and destruction, God has promised a new covenant. We see hope of a new day, of a beloved community every day. We see it in the youth who are coming together and standing up. We see it in women who are brave. And we know it is in us too, we know deep in our hearts that we too are able to bring about this covenant that God has written on our hearts. We are capable of loving the ones we other. May it be so!