

New Covenant

Back in 1942, the Florida Legislature enacted a statute requiring that the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag be recited by students in every public school, K-12, at the beginning of every school day. It's all written down, escribed in Chapter 1003, paragraph 44.

Not only must the pledge be recited, the statute also stipulates that students shall stand with "the right hand over the heart." Furthermore, "all civilians shall stand at attention, men removing their headdress, except when such headdress is worn for religious purposes."

If a student doesn't want to take part in the pledge, he or she must bring a note signed by a parent excusing said participation.

Every few years, some legislators attempt to up the ante by enshrining this requirement in the state constitution. Apparently, they're afraid some atheist with a slick lawyer will come along and file a lawsuit to keep kids from saying the pledge. They want to put the requirement in the constitution, where the Florida Supreme Court can't get at it.

In other words, they won't ban assault weapons, but they would like to carve the pledge of allegiance into the granite of the state constitution.

Well, the prophet Jeremiah has a message about that kind of thing. He learned this lesson the hard way: *Laws carved into stone don't necessarily change hearts*. In fact, sometimes laws can have the opposite effect.

Israel had a law carved into stone. The Ten Commandments, we call it, or the Decalogue. Moses brought it down from the mountain as a gift from the Lord, and what a good gift it was. It showed the people of God how to love God and to love one another. It laid out the essence of what it means to live in community under God. It was a very good gift -- a gift of grace, in fact -- a sign of God's covenant love.

Those stone tablets were like a pair of wedding rings – tokens of promises made that were meant to be kept. God kept God’s promises, but Israel, God’s bride, broke hers. Here is Jeremiah’s way of putting it:

I took them by the hand, to bring them out of the land of Egypt – a covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord.

Overlook, if you will, Jeremiah’s impolitic use of male language for God. The metaphor of a broken marriage is apt. Good marriages are built on mutuality. When one half of the couple is bearing most of the burden and the other just coasts along, it doesn’t matter what set of rules is being kept or broken, that covenant is in trouble.

Years ago, a married couple came to see me to talk about their struggling relationship. They were trying to live their married life by a set of complicated negotiations. “*He’s* not following the agreement,” she complained. “Neither is *she*,” he countered. They then launched into a long list of infractions.

“You didn’t take out the trash last week.”

“That was on Wednesday. Tuesdays and Thursdays are my trash days.”

“I changed the baby *three times* more often than you did last week.”

“Well, I changed the oil in *both* cars.”

I felt caught between General Motors and the United Auto Workers. You can’t operate a marriage that way. Marriage is a covenant, not a labor contract. Even if both parties in that relationship had managed to follow their nitpicking rules, they wouldn’t have had a marriage. A negotiated contract, perhaps, but not a marriage.

Israel’s marriage to the Lord came to an end, or so they thought, with a series of disasters symptomatic of their broken relationship with the Lord: the fall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple, and the long years of exile in Babylon.

By the time the prophet Jeremiah delivers today’s oracle, only the old-timers remember what the temple had looked like. The grandkids are running around playing Babylonian video games, the old songs are all but forgotten, and the only

saying from the old days that anybody quotes is that terrible proverb about the fathers eating sour grapes and the children's teeth being set on edge.

“I hate that proverb,” Jeremiah says. “Forget that stupid proverb. Remember this instead: The Lord hasn't forgotten you. The Lord is dusting off his tux and polishing up his patent shoes. The Lord is still your paramour. God's love for you hasn't ended.”

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.

Not that the old covenant is abrogated. Far from it. This is the Lord's attempt to fix what had become broken, to rebuild on the old foundation. **It will not be like the old covenant I made with their ancestors . . . the covenant that they broke . . .** That covenant was carved in stone, but the Lord will try a new approach:

I will put my law within their hearts, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people.

No more need of marriage manuals and carefully negotiated rules of engagement. No more “he said, she said.” No more retreat into self-condemnation or self-congratulation. No more having to define Israel's relationship to the Lord by constitutional amendment.

No longer shall they teach one another, or say to one another, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least to the greatest, says the Lord, for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Jeremiah is describing a covenant relationship. He's also describing the perfect marriage, the kind of marriage none of us lives out ourselves, but glimpses of which we can see from time to time, even in our own covenant relationships. I'll give you two examples:

I remember a couple in this very congregation who long ago joined the Church Triumphant. He brought her a cup of coffee in bed every morning of their married life. Call it a law written on his heart. Then her health began to fail, and he wore himself out taking care of her. When he died, she moved into a nursing

home. By special dispensation of the nursing home director and in violation of the rules, an aide continued to bring her a cup of coffee every morning.

I asked the director, who was Jewish, why she allowed the infraction. “It’s a *mitzvah*,” she said (which means a fulfillment of the commandments -- a good deed). “Sometimes you have to break the rules in order to fulfill the law.”

I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts.

I have another example of covenant love. I hope you won’t be offended by it. I wouldn’t share it with you if I didn’t think it reflected precisely the kind of thing Jeremiah is talking about. It’s about two men. I’ll call them Robert and John.

I met them years ago when I served on the Board of Big Bend CARES. That was back in the early days of the AIDS pandemic, before we knew about HIV, protease inhibitors, or drug cocktails. Back then, if you contracted AIDS, you wasted away as the disease robbed you of your vigor, your friends, and even your sanity.

Robert and John were partners. Robert’s family abandoned him when he came out. So did his church. When Robert tested positive for AIDS, his pastor said it was God’s punishment. God seems to have disagreed, for he led Robert and John to an Episcopal church whose members welcomed them both of them and made them part of their family.

I knew the priest at that church. He called me one night when he was on vacation. “Robert’s back in the hospital,” he said. “They don’t think he’ll come out alive. John wants a priest to visit, but I’m in a pinch. You’ll do.”

So I did. The sign on the hospital door called for visitors to suit up in mask and gown. When I went in, Robert didn’t know me. He didn’t know anyone. He was delirious. John was there, however, sitting in a chair by the bed, holding Robert’s hand. We talked. I said a prayer commending Robert to God. All the while, John held on to Robert.

I left the room, pulled off the mask and gown, and went home, but John didn’t. He stayed there, in that same spot, for 36 more hours, until Robert died.

I'd call that covenant love, dear friends. You can pass a law. You can carve it in stone. You can enshrine it in the constitution if you like, but you can't legislate that kind of love. That takes grace, the grace revealed in the God who says, **"I will be your God and you shall be my people,"** the grace of the one who says, **"Come unto me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."**

Covenant love is much the same as covenant law. It is inscribed on the heart. It is founded on forgiveness, not blame, and it comes from God. Jesus was showing covenant love and fulfilling covenant law when he told his disciples, **"And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself"** (John 12:32). Jesus bore that love upon the cross, lifted up from the earth, where there was no one to hold his hand.

These are challenging times, beloved. There are a lot of issues these days that Christians, like state legislators, can choose to occupy their time. Some reflect God's covenant love, God's longing for people to live in community, honoring God and one other. Others are merely ways of carving words into stone, an approach God abandoned long ago.

I will put my law within their hearts, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people.