

Jeremiah 31:31-34
Fifth Sunday in Lent
Caroline M. Kelly
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I have new found respect for tattoos this week. In the past, I have tolerated them. At best, I have been curious about them. The idea of etching words or figures on my own body never occurred to me, at least not until now. But desperate times call for desperate measures.

Jeremiah knew something about this. With the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, it appeared that Israel's relationship with God had been destroyed. The covenant had been breached. The relationship with God was irreparably broken and the survivors were scattered in other countries, without hope and without a future.

After years and years of warning the people and lamenting the destruction, here, today, Jeremiah finally offers them a word of hope: God is making plans to restore their relationship and bring them home. The basis of this turnaround is nothing less than pure grace, a gift which they did not earn and which they did not deserve. God will wipe the slate clean. God will forgive and forget. They will go home and start over.

From now on, they will no longer have a relationship based on an external list of how to's inscribed on the stone tablets given at Mt. Sinai, but one that is inscribed on their hearts. God will make a new covenant with them, not by putting the broken tablets back together but, by writing the law on their hearts instead.

Put another way:

I will put my instructions deep within them, and I will tattoo them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.

Jeremiah hopes for the day when God's instructions, God's love is tattooed on [their] hearts, so deep within us and in ink so indelible that [they] know nothing else but to serve God in all [they] do.¹

One pastor used his blog to collect stories from people with tattoos to find out whether they had anything to do with their faith. He was intrigued to discover how much faith did relate to some people's tattoos.

One of the responders, who has shalom, the Hebrew word for peace tattooed on his arm wrote, "I believe shalom is God's vision for the world, plain and simple. Getting it on my forearm was also a testament to what I hope God's promise is,

¹ <http://www.adamjcopeland.com/2010/10/17/sermon-hope-in-god/>.

post-holocaust. In the concentration camps, Jews were tattooed with their prisoner numbers on their forearms. I hoped shalom would be a counter-message to the atrocities of the holocaust...”

Someone else wrote, “My tattoo represents the fact that my body is a vessel to work for the Gospel in this world. So the tattoo is a reminder and a tool of engagement into conversations with others...It reminds me that it’s never about me, but about Christ and the power of God’s grace in the world around me and through me to others.”

I will put my instructions deep within them, and I will write it/tattoo them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.²

Unlike the stone tables, which can be broken and put aside, God’s covenant in [our] hearts is more enduring. God’s hold on us cannot be erased without cutting out a part of ourselves. It is an internal identity that will be evidenced by external behavior. We will live God’s law not because we are obliged to but because we want to, because our hearts are shaped that way.³

When we baptize Jax Boor later in the service, he will join the community of faith with hearts shaped by God. His identity as a beloved child of God will be sealed with water and we will promise to help him to grow into that identity, as one who is called to follow Jesus. This promise means we will read him the stories of Jesus but, more than that, it means we will show him how to live as if the stories are etched on our hearts.

As Christians, we, like the people of Israel, are called to live as the people of God, to relate differently, and to demonstrate the kind of forgiveness and love that God has granted us. We need to be God’s people for a world that has forgotten what that looks like.

For the sake of the gospel and the world, we need to concern ourselves with what concerns others, extend compassion to those who hurt, stand by each other in times of trouble, and celebrate together in times of joy.

Jeremiah testifies that God has done this for us. So, we are called to do this, also, for each other.

Jeremiah hopes for the day when God’s instructions, God’s love is tattooed on our hearts, so deep within us and in ink so indelible that we know nothing else but to serve God in all we do.⁴

But in the meantime, I’m seriously considering getting it tattooed on my skin. Who’s with me?

² Ibid.

³ <https://www.religion-online.org/article/branded-by-god-jeremiah-3131-34/>.

⁴ Copeland.