

The Vortex of Grace
Sermon for Sunday 21st March 2021
Cashmere Presbyterian Church
Rev Hamish Galloway

Texts:

Jeremiah 31: 31-34

Psalm 51:1-12

John 12:20-33

Introduction

Today's message is about the contrast between exclusion and inclusion. The ultimate key message is that God's love graciously extends a hug of welcome to all humanity.

We all know of situations where we feel excluded, and conversely where we feel warmly welcomed. Some years ago I managed the St Andrew's College cricket team. The Black Caps were in town and some of the bowlers in our team were very excited to be invited to attend a net session and bowl to the Black Caps. I was dismayed when, upon their return, they told me about the treatment they received from one particular player in the NZ team, a high profile, much vaunted player who they say didn't want them there. He was sullen, rude, derogatory and sent them on menial errands. They felt unwanted, embarrassed and demeaned.

By contrast, when I was a lad and mad keen on my cricket, the New Zealand cricketer Vic Pollard was a teacher at my school. When a test match was looming he would invite us to bowl to him in the nets at lunch times, all and sundry, from the best bowler in the school to the least. There was fun, laughter, and a sense of us in this with him, all together included.

This second image is akin to the Kingdom of God. But the reality of the first image of exclusion was, for many centuries, closer to the truth. Let me explain in terms of the Old Covenant of Moses and the New Covenant of Jesus. This is the comparison Jeremiah uses and we will pick that up and examine it.

1. **Old Covenant:** covenant means contract and is particularly applied to God and us. The deal was, keep my law perfectly and you will know the full expression of my love. It focuses on the holiness of God that cannot be tainted by human sinfulness, therefore, for there to be loving relationship we must be sinless!

This, of course, creates a problem. It is a problem highlighted by our Old Testament reading for today – Jeremiah 31:31-34

Jeremiah talks repeatedly about the urgent need for the heartfelt knowledge of God to be real in the lives of the people.

At the same time, he laments the inevitability of human sinfulness. In 17:1 he uses the image of the human heart as being as cold as stone, with sinfulness engraved on it by an iron stylus used to cut scriptures into rock. The idea is of sin deeply imbedded in the human condition. And he alludes to this in v32 when he says:

“Although I was like a husband to them, they did not keep the covenant.”

Jeremiah is referring to the story of Hosea, written just before Jeremiah's time. It is a heart-rending story of a loving faithful husband whose wife is serially unfaithful, eventually falling into prostitution and degradation. It is an extreme story of betrayal, designed to highlight the human race's headlong descent into disobedience to God's law.

We see this graphically displayed in the Adam and Eve story with the forbidden fruit.

We see it most poignantly in the life of King David. I don't think any other person in the Bible has their life and character so revealed for all to see. He was a great king of Israel, a man of prayer, a man after God's own heart! Yet scripture also reveals his adultery, murderous scheming and huge family dysfunction caused in no small way by his own missteps. David eloquently expresses it in Psalm 52:1-12.

And we see it, don't we, in our own lives! If the acceptable veneer is stripped away for all to see, we too, each of us, will have our sinful missteps revealed. I remember one time when I was playing bad golf. I play another terrible shot and, in an act of anger with myself, I hit my head with my club - not hard, but deliberately and bad temperedly. I open a cut that bled and bled....how embarrassing. My moment of rage revealed for all to see!

And so, if living a perfectly good life is the way in with God, we are all out.

Conclusion then is this – under the old covenant we are all excluded!

Why have such a deal with God as the Old Covenant if it was so doomed to failure and exclusion? Galatians 3 explains that the law and the Old Covenant are like a teacher, specifically a teacher tutoring the young or a household.

So what is this teacher called The Law teaching us?

Key message is this: we *cannot* reach God or relationship with God on our own efforts or merits.

It is a message drawn out over centuries through the existence of this Old Covenant, because we are slow to get it! We are as a race so proud. We like to be self-sufficient and self-righteous. We need it drummed into us that, actually, on the occasion of our relationship with God, we can't do it ourselves – we fail and fall short all the time.

What then is needed?

2. A New Covenant

Jeremiah says the time is coming....

The time came with Jesus!

How does that look – what is the deal?

All are in! Included! This is inclusive.

We see this in Jeremiah when he says *'all will know me, from the least to the greatest.'*

We see it in the John reading. Firstly this reading begins with non-Jews looking to meet Jesus – this is a hint of what is to come, that is, all are welcome. Then this very inclusive statement from Jesus in verse 32:

'When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to me.'

The lifting up is multi-layered in its reference to what was to follow.

- Jesus was to be lifted up onto a cross to die (our sins are forgiven)
- Jesus was to be lifted up out of death and grave to life (eternal life is assured)
- Jesus was then to ascend to be once again with the Father in heaven (the human heart is taken to connect with the very heart of God)

As I reflected on this, the image I got was 'vortex' – a whirling mass of fluid that sucks things into the centre.

I think this represents what happened at that first Easter when, by his death, resurrection and ascension, all humanity is sucked into the grace of God.

You might rebel against this image because it seems to defy choice. I would retort, we'll still have choice in terms of acceptance or rejection, but we are all included in this forgiving reconciling event.

That is, we all know that, after a family conflict for example, and apologies made, forgiveness is offered, the choice then becomes – do I accept that and be reconciled or do I remain cold hearted and estranged?

There are two images in our scriptures that help us to step into this new covenant of grace with all its benefits:

1. The Seed – Jesus said

'I am telling you the truth: a grain of wheat remains no more than a single grain unless it is dropped into the ground and dies... Those who love their own life will lose it; those who hate their own life in this world will keep it for life eternal.'

He means, we need to die to self-reliance and self-righteousness, for with God they fail, and instead humbly acknowledge our need for God and accept his gracious forgiveness and love.

2. A soft heart

Jeremiah, in a number of places, talks about the old heart of stone, engraved with sin, to be replaced by a heart of flesh – a warm, beating heart. This heart is also engraved; humble and open to God, there is then access for the Holy Spirit to start writing the ways of God deep within our being, so that goodness is not an external law but overflows from the work of the Holy Spirit on a humble and contrite heart!

As Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 3:3

'you are a letter from Christ... written not with ink but with the Spirit of the Living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.'

Conclusion

On the occasion of my 40th wedding anniversary, I got a wedding ring tattoo with 4 red ruby dots, one for each decade of marriage. Superficially it was because I find actual rings hard to wear and keep losing them. At a deeper level it is about the fact that, after 40 years of loving marriage, Anne is etched into my being and this permanent tattooing of my skin represents that.

In the same way may we know we are deeply loved, forgiven and included by God, by allowing this message to be tattooed on our hearts by the Holy Spirit.