

A Reflection for the Fifth Week of Lent

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As we begin this fifth leg of our journey of recovering our true self, the prophet Jeremiah traces the relationship God desires to have with us which he describes as a “new covenant.” The prophet jogs our memory about the first covenant when God “took our ancestors by the hand to lead them forth from the land of Egypt.”

The infinite yet intimate nature of God is captured in the language of the covenant. A covenant, the prophet says that is so personal that it is no longer written on tablets of stone but written upon our hearts by the tender, compassionate hand of God. Jeremiah lovingly describes this relationship God desires to have with us: “I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

We know from experience what happens when we know something “by heart.” We can learn a song or a prayer “by heart.” But sometimes this only means we learn it by rote—memorize the dos and the don’ts, the doctrine and dates and history and tradition but never integrate into our lives. We can memorize for a test but once the test is taken we forget what we learned because we don’t integrate it into our life experience.

But when we talk of knowing something or someone by heart, we are not talking about rote memory, but relational memory. When we know someone by heart, we know the other on a deeper level because we have spent time with the other, tracing each one’s story. We have created a safe harbor for each other to take risks in speaking from the depths of one’s heart. We are willing to sacrifice our own needs and wants for the sake of the other. We don’t hide behind our fears or insecurities, are not afraid to name and claim our weakness, and don’t pretend or put on masks. When we know and are known by heart, we begin to understand the nature of the new covenant.

The infinite yet intimate quality of this new covenant of love is portrayed in the Gospel. The people who arrive for the Passover come to Philip and ask him, “Sir, we would like to see Jesus.” They don’t ask for a copy of the catechism or the text of Jesus’ latest sermon—they want to see him, to meet him. When Philip and Andrew go to Jesus with this request, Jesus gives us one of the most beautiful images of the paschal mystery that is known by heart by all who truly seek to live in loving relationship with others. “Unless the grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit.

On Ash Wednesday, we committed ourselves to play and pray in the ashes of our lives. As we near the end of our journey, the cross we etch upon our hearts is made with the flour made from the wheat of our dreams that has fallen to the earth and died. We arrive at a place, a field, perhaps where amber waves of dreams blown by the breeze ripple on the landscape like a spring breeze brushing a golden pond. We know when we see this wheat, these dreams, so golden and ripe, that the harvest is almost ready.

This is the nature of sacrifice—of doing what is holy—out of love for others. We see it in Jesus and we see it in the sacrifice parents make for their children, spouses make for each other, and adult sons and daughters make for aging and elderly parents. They do this because of the new covenant, the relationship of love. As Jesus says, if we focus only on ourselves, our own selfish concerns, we will lose our lives. But if we give our lives in loving service of others, then we are living the new covenant and our lives will be a continuum of compassion and care all the way to eternal life.

Have our hearts been broken open yet? Have we allowed the pain and suffering we have experienced in our lives to break through the hard exterior, allowing us to see the words of love written on our hearts? Or are we still resisting God's invitation to be vulnerable and so recognize our true self?

Let us pray together:

Loving God,
You desire to make a new covenant with us.
It is not written on stone, but on our hearts.
Your covenant love cannot be traced on monuments made of granite,
easily chipped and sometimes shattered by our sin.
Your covenant can only be found when hard hearts are cracked open
to see the reality of this relationship:
You will be our God and we shall be your people.
You forgive all our iniquities and remember our sin no more.
As your Son Jesus reminds us,
unless the wheat of our dreams, ripe and ready for threshing,
falls to the earth and dies; unless it is crushed and ground;
it cannot become the bread that will nourish another's dreams,
another's hopes, another's hungers.
Give us the courage to love.

+ Amen.