

Grateful for this Life
Stewardship Sunday October 27, 2019
Jeremiah 31: 31-34, 1 John 4: 7-8,

Six weeks ago, or so, I was in my car listening 89.3 the Current, as I do, and a hip hop track started playing. I was listening to the words racing by, rhythmic and smart. I heard the word “Christians” and “God is Love.” I thought, “Wait a minute! I may have found myself some sermon material.” The song “God is Love” is performed by the rapper Common, and is a collaboration of Common, Leon Bridges (a soul singer) and Jonathan Mc Reynolds, considered a leading figure in a new generation of gospel artists. The album “Let Love” is inspired by the book, *Let Love Have the Last Word.*”

I’m going to add this song to our texts for the day. You have the lyrics on the back side of the hymn “When We Thank God.” Get ready, the lyrics are going to go by quickly.

Play “God is Love” (4 minutes)

The theme of this year’s Stewardship Campaign is “Our Promise,” and we’ve been talking about God’s promises, God’s covenant’s too. We read the story of God’s covenant with Noah. God is dismayed by the violence and corruption of the earth, and God responds with the violence of the flood. God is then so grieved by that that God puts the bow in the cloud as a sign that God will not turn to violence like that again to heal the earth. It doesn’t work. God needs a different plan.

So God calls Abram and Sarai. God will bless them so that they and their descendents will be a blessing. God promises that Abram and Sarai’s descendents will be like the stars of

the sky. God is now partnering with a people in the healing of the world. That's us. We are a part of this work.

Next the descendents of Abraham and Sarah will find themselves enslaved in Egypt. God rescues and delivers them and gives them a covenant, the Ten Commandments. God says, "if you follow these commandments, you will stay away from the destructive and dehumanizing ways of the empire of Egypt. Following the commandments is a part of this healing work. It will lead people together to wholeness and health. It will lead to right relationship among people, right relationship with creation, right relationship with God. It all fits together.

My Hebrew Scripture professor Carolyn Pressler said that the story of the Older Testament is that of covenant and then the people wander away from God, and then God pulls them back. God tries something new and the people wander away, and God finds them and pulls them back. Then God tries something new and the people wander away and God pulls them back.

What we have in our chapter from Jeremiah for today is a place where God is pulling the people back and trying something new. God's says, "you've broken the covenant, bad things are happening, there's injustice and exile and destruction of creation, so maybe I need to do something new. If I write the commandments on your heart, will that will help?" It's like God is accepting that maybe human beings have a different learning style than divine beings. "Having those tablets outside to read. Maybe that's not a good idea. The human beings, they read things, and they know things, but they still do the bad things. We have to try something else."

What we have here in Jeremiah is another image of God not giving up on people. God's forgiving, letting go, trying again, and moving closer. The solution for God in this effort to make this relationship work with human beings as we're partnering in the healing of the world, isn't to pull back and move farther away, the solution is to move closer. "Maybe I need to write on their hearts," God says.

This is the story of the church too. Jesus is a sign to us that "God is with us." In the church, we are inside the body of Christ. We become this redemptive, saving action for the world, as a community, together. Our story is of God not giving up and going away, but of God's love moving closer.

The song God is Love, gets this, I think. When I was first listening to this song, and the chorus especially, I was hearing the song as a reminder. God's love is even there in the hard times. When you are in the hard times it is hard to remember that. Hard to see it. We forget, at least I do. "Remember," I thought the song was saying.

But as I listened to the song more, I realized, "ohhhh, no. I'm not right." The song is an affirmation. It's almost like it's defiant in the face of despair. The writers of this song aren't like me. They are saying they won't forget. "Even when the hard times come, I'll be standing in your love. Grateful, grateful for this life." I'll be grateful, even when the hard times come. That's who I'm going to be. Maybe I was listening for comfort. Maybe that's what I was wanting and needing, but the song is coming from a place of gratitude. The two feelings are interrelated but they are different.

The song points out where God's love has been seen, and what it is doing, and the song points this out in the upside down, underdog way that is consistent with what we see of Jesus and what we see in the Hebrew scriptures. This time, instead of hearing the witness from the perspective of the people of ancient Israel, we hear the witness from the perspective of the African American community. Both are speaking from the underside, as outsiders.

Like our scriptures the song makes human again those who have been dehumanized.

Search for Samaritans in the hood, misunderstood

A savior comes, will he only come for the good?

God, I see you in the streets where the checks is cashed

I know you in the words, "where the first is last."

In 2005, you saved lives in the Bayou (Hurricane Katrina)

I know you in the mouth of the spouse singing, "I do"

We were Buffalo Soldiers(African American soldiers serving on the Western Frontier after the Cival War), dreadlocked Rastas (Rastafarians who have an Afro-centric theology)

Praying to Jehovah, Rafa, in the back of cop cars

Love is what God used to put the planet in rotation

It's what the culture used to build a hip-hop nation. (this is not what we in the white world normally hear about hip hop)

It's what we told the world when we said our lives matter.

Turn the student to a master, hustler to a pastor

It's why I'm a rapper, it's all that I'm after.

In this song, God's redemptive, changing love is made visible in the midst of struggle. The song proclaims that God's love is in places that we've been told not to look. The song is affirming people who have not been affirmed, and it is saying that this is what God's love has been doing this whole time. It's saying, "God's love has been close. Don't you see?"

This is why the writers of this song will not forget. This is why the writers will be grateful through all things, because God's love does not give up or turn away. God stays with us and moves closer. Even in the hard times we see God's love with us moving closer.

Stewardship Sunday will always be about gratitude. We give out of gratitude, in thanksgiving for God's generosity and love given to us when we are on the mountaintop and when we are going down the other side of the mountain and the hard times have come.

Pastor Lauren and I have been commenting on the hard times many in the church are going through right now. There seems to be a lot we are carrying in our personal lives. Our nation is in turmoil too. It affects us. It's like breathing in polluted air. The ministry of our church is strong in so many ways. God has been doing great things here. You have been doing great things here. And, it has not been an easy year. Parts of our life together have been quite painful and disappointing. Both are true. Our ministry is strong and this year has been hard.

And yet, we're a community that carries the story of God's love revealed in hard times: love revealed in slavery, love revealed in the wilderness, love revealed in exile, love revealed in the cross, love revealed...

We're a community that sings a different song. Right now, in this time of polluted air, we need communities that can take that air in and exhale something beautiful, something redemptive, something hopeful. We will point to God's love that we see, that we know, that we stand in that we remain confident in. We will not forget. We will be grateful.

"Even when the hard times come. I'll be standing in your love. Grateful, grateful for this life."

Amen.