

Covenants, Not Walls
 Rev. Cindy Maddox
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Jeremiah 1:4-10, 31:31-34

The first passage that Leota read for us

is about God's call to the prophet Jeremiah.

It is a passage frequently chosen for services of ordination.

It has common appeal.

It is, after all, God's call to someone who questions that call,

like many ministers do,

and it includes God's assurances that "don't worry, I'll be with you,
 and it's not all about you!"

But the focus is usually on the first part, the assurances part.

"Do not say, 'I am only a child;

for you shall go to all to whom I send you,

and you shall speak whatever I command you.

Do not be afraid of them,

for I am with you to deliver you."

I have not heard any ordination sermons that focus on the last part,
 where God is quoted as saying,

"Today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,

to pluck up and to pull down,

to destroy and to overthrow,

to build and to plant."

First of all, no sensible candidate for ordination would claim

that God has appointed them over nations and kingdoms!

But also there's all that destruction.

Yes, God says God will appoint you "to build and to plant,"

but also "to pluck up, to pull down, to destroy, and to overthrow."

Why are planting and building only 1/3 of the job?

Why is there so much destruction?

Maybe because we have so much that needs to be torn down.

We have so many walls.

I'm not talking about boundaries.

Boundaries keep us safe and healthy.

But walls divide.

We build walls between us and others—
 walls that keep us at a safe distance;
 walls that protect us from sympathetic eyes;
 walls that keep others from seeing how much we hurt.
We build walls and then wonder why we feel so alone.

We build walls in order to compartmentalize our lives,
 with soundproof doors so that the different areas don't mix.
Within our hearts and lives we have a walled-off work area,
 a cluttered space for family,
 maybe a small porch out front for charity work,
 and maybe even an itty bitty prayer closet in the back.

But when we keep the different areas of our lives separate,
 we limit our power and become less than we could be.

We become stressed when our room for family is too small.

We become burned-out when our charity is not informed and empowered
 by our faith.

We become emotionally sterile if our spirituality and our sexuality
 are not viewed and experienced together.

We build walls and then we wonder why we feel so fragmented.

And finally, we have built walls that protect us from being changed
 by our encounters with others—
 graffiti-covered walls that label people who are different from us;
 white-washed walls that help us pretend we're affirming;
 wallpapered-walls that cover cracks and holes with flowers and bows.
We build walls and then wonder why we are never transformed.

It's no wonder our passage from Jeremiah

 calls for twice as much destruction as construction. . .

We have built so many walls, and tearing them down takes time.

There are no bulldozers for the walls of the spirit—

 or if there are, they are so painful that we would never ask for them.

Walls usually have to be torn down brick by brick, stone by stone.

But too often we don't want to take them down.

We don't want to raze the house to the ground,
 especially when it comes to the hard work of dismantling racism.
 Instead, we'll just redecorate.

We'll put a slipcover on the sagging sofa of tolerance.

We'll paint over the dry rot of microaggressions.

We'll put shrubs around the crumbling foundation of a country
 built on genocide and slavery.

But the time is up for redecorating.

We need to tear down, and keep tearing down, the walls.

I am reminded of Robert Frost's famous poem called "Mending Wall."
 People most often quote the line, "Good fences make good neighbors,"
 suggesting that we can be good neighbors only when
 the walls between us are steady and sure.

But that is the opposite of what Frost was saying in his poem.

Listen to this excerpt.

*Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
 That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
 And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
 And makes gaps even two can pass abreast. . . .
 No one has seen them made or heard them made,
 But at spring mending-time we find them there.
 I let my neighbour know beyond the hill;
 And on a day we meet to walk the line
 And set the wall between us once again.
 We keep the wall between us as we go.
 To each the boulders that have fallen to each. . . .
 There where it is we do not need the wall:
 He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
 My apple trees will never get across
 And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
 He only says, "Good fences make good neighbors."...
 "Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it
 Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
 Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
 What I was walling in or walling out,*

*And to whom I was like to give offense.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down.*

There is something in us that doesn't love our walls.
When it comes to our personal walls,
 we may think we need them, think we want them,
 think we need their protection.
But our souls do not love a wall.
 Our souls long for human connection,
 the knitting of our hearts so that unraveling is our undoing.
Our souls long for connection with God and one another.
 Something there is that does not love a wall.

Tear down and destroy.
Jeremiah fulfilled that call of God to tear down and destroy.
For most of his ministry, Jeremiah was the prophet of bad news.
 He pronounced God's judgment upon the leaders of Judah especially,
 for not upholding the covenant with God.
In the original covenant (the one God made with Moses at Mount Sinai),
 God "promised to liberate the Hebrews from slavery
 and in return they promised to act like liberated people.
 That meant two things: worshiping only [God],
 and treating others in the same manner
 that they had been treated by God."¹

Over and over God told the people how to behave toward those on the margins
because they were once on the margins and God saved them.

Deuteronomy 10: "You shall love the immigrant
 for you were immigrants in the land of Egypt."

Deuteronomy 24: "You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan
 of justice.... Remember that you were a slave in Egypt
 and God redeemed you from there."

But the people did not do it, and Jeremiah blasted them for it,
 and when they were exiled in Babylon, they saw it as God's punishment
 for their failure to keep the covenant.

¹ Duncan, Stan. "Written on Their Hearts." homebynow.blogspot.com

Once Jerusalem had fallen, however,
Jeremiah put his message of doom and gloom behind him.

He turned to offering comfort and hope.

In this passage Jeremiah promised hope because of a new covenant.

The new covenant didn't replace the old covenant in content.

It was still based on Torah, and it still contained the same rules:

worship only God, and treat others the way God had treated them.

"It would not be new in terms of content ... but in terms of place.

This new covenant which would be made available to them

would not be imposed upon them from the outside,

but would be 'within them,' 'on their hearts,' or 'in their center.'"²

God will write it on our hearts.

In a few minutes in our congregational meeting, we will consider some covenants.

We will vote on a Land Acknowledgment Statement

that includes our commitment to interrupt the unjust legacy

and to work toward repairing the injustices done to indigenous people.

We also will vote on whether to become an Immigrant Welcoming Congregation,

and in that covenant we state our promise to

seek out, welcome, and deepen relationships with our immigrant neighbors

and to work together with them to see that immigrant justice is done.

We also will review a racial justice covenant which is still in draft form,

but that states our commitment

to unmask, dismantle, and eradicate racism.

In all three statements we lament for and repent of our actions in the past.

I have heard a concern that we will sign these covenants

and then forget about them,

thinking we've done what was needed by making a statement.

But these are the covenants we make after the first ones failed.

Like the Israelites of old, we as a country

have failed to do as the prophets commanded.

Like the Israelites, we have failed to love God by loving our neighbor.

We have failed to welcome the immigrant

to free the captives, to protect the vulnerable.

And so these covenants must not be written only on paper or online.

² Ibid.

These covenants must be written on our hearts.

God writes upon our hearts every time we open our lives
to someone we'd rather exclude,
every time we take a stand,
every time we speak even if our voice shakes.

And every time God writes on our hearts, the words get a little clearer,
a little easier to read, a little easier to follow.

When God's covenant is written on our hearts,
we give without reservation and love without limit.

I won't presume to tell you what God thinks, or even what I think God thinks
about every situation or ethical issue or political topic.

But I will tell you what I think God writes.

God writes justice.

God writes grace.

God writes mercy.

God writes love.

And when we have God's love written on our hearts,
then together, we have the power to tear down walls of injustice,
to pluck up and destroy the roots of racism.

It is our calling.

Surely the day is coming, says our God.