

Written on the Heart
Jeremiah 31:31-34
October 31, 2021
First Presbyterian Church, Luling

For, I don't know, 25 or 30 years, my grandmother had a cartoon drawing on her refrigerator. I don't know what happened to it when we cleaned out her house, but it looked something like this one. It was just a line drawing, and I'll describe it for those of you who are on the phone. You may have seen it before, I think it's somewhat well known. It has some sort of water bird, I guess a crane, who is eating a frog. The frog's head is already in the bird's mouth, but the frog's front legs are wrapped around the crane's throat, trying to strangle it. The caption reads, "Never Give Up." It's a little more violent than it is funny, but the message rings true.

I don't know who gave this photocopied cartoon to my grandmother, but it fit her character more than most. She lived to 95, and I expect simply "not giving up" is one way a person makes it to be that old. As you might expect from someone that advanced in years, she saw her share of illness and grief and hardship and pain. But she kept moving forward.

"Never give up" could be a theme for our Scripture reading today. And here is where the frog and bird cartoon becomes a problem, because the party that never gives up in the Jeremiah passage is God. And God is not trying to hurt the other party. It is not the *humans* who are persistent, never giving up. Quite the opposite, actually. The humans *have* given up repeatedly, over and over, on fulfilling God's covenant with them. God has offered, repeatedly, to be their God, if they will just be God's people, if they will just follow God's teaching and God's law. This is the God who delivered them out of slavery in Egypt, who initiated a covenant with them way back in the time of their ancestor Abraham.

It became difficult for the humans to worship a God that they couldn't see and who didn't have a particular place where they could go to worship, so God accommodated them in their weakness. Moses went up Mt. Sinai and received the tablets of stone, on which were engraved the law.

Now, we tend to think of "law" as a burden, as rules and regulations that cramp our style, as a necessary evil to make society function. But this law from God was a gift of grace to the Israelites. For the first time, they had something concrete that showed the covenant that they had with the Lord. From the beginning then, this covenant that God made with the people, where God would

be their God and they would be God's people, was based on God's grace, God's initiative, God's control. It was never rooted in the people's response, though that was of course their part of the covenant, their end of the bargain.

But, as humans are apt to do, they didn't do what had been laid out for them to do. The next chapters in the saga become somewhat of a broken record. The kingdoms of Israel and Judah, led by kings, went astray. They worshipped other gods, they did not follow the law that the Lord had written for them. The law, so easy to see, so straightforward and concrete, wasn't enough to keep them faithful to the covenant.

But over and over, God never gave up on them. God renewed the covenant over and over, God gave them second chance after second chance. They just didn't seem to absorb where they had gone wrong and sure couldn't figure out how to fix it. Disaster was coming, and they couldn't see it. They wouldn't listen to the prophets that God had sent them.

The kingdom of Israel had fallen and the people were in exile. The kingdom of Judah, likewise, was in shambles. Most of the powerful people had been taken away to Babylon, and those that remained were aimless, poor, helpless and hopeless. Here for a few chapters, Jeremiah is a prophet who brings comfort to a grieving and frightened group of people.

Here he reminds them that God has never given up on them, despite the generations of faithlessness and disobedience. And he proclaims that God has not given up on them now, despite the bleak situation in which they find themselves. In fact, God is offering a renewing of the covenant.

Just as God has before. This is not a new covenant, this is the same covenant, with the same God and the same guidelines. The Lord will be their God, and they will be God's people. Just as before, the renewed covenant is based completely in God's grace, it is at God's initiative, it is accommodating to the people's weaknesses.

When we look at the big story of Scripture, what we see, among other things, is a God that is forgiving and gracious, abounding in steadfast love, and persistent, beyond all reason. No matter how many times the people break the covenant, God never gives up and always offers another way for them to join the covenant and be God's people.

The covenant that was written on tablets of stone, though it was a gift of God's grace, was too difficult for the people to follow. So this time, God will take the same covenant and renew it by putting it within the people themselves, by writing it on their hearts. The covenant is the same agreement with the same

God, it is just located somewhere different. It will be an internal covenant, shaping the people from the inside out. God will not only offer the covenant but make them able to keep it.

The Lord never gives up on the people. And the good news is that we are God's people. And that God's covenant with us is written within our hearts, continually making us into God's covenant people. And the good news is of course, that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of God's promise that Jeremiah spoke. Christ is written within our hearts, Jesus enables us to be God's people, because God in Jesus Christ is one of us. God never gives up. Thanks be to God.