

Sermon Starter – Letting the Seed Coats Decay

Jeremiah 31:31-34, Psalm 51:1-12, John 12:20-33

The problem: God continues to uphold the covenants made with Noah and with Moses, yet God's people continue to turn away. The psalmist puts the quandary in stark terms: humans are born guilty, conceived in sin. Whatever it is that causes us to walk away from God seems written into our very beings right from the beginning. External covenants, because they are external, are too easy to break: they don't address our human problem at the level it needs to be addressed, in the DNA of our deepest selves both as individuals and as a community.

The grace: As in previous covenants, God acts unilaterally: God wants a relationship with the people and is determined to have it. This time, however, the covenant is given without reason or explanation. And this time, God refuses to take a chance on a covenant written on stone, instead writing it "on the hearts" of the partner people. While in Western minds the language of hearts is associated primarily with feelings, the heart in the Bible is the inner aspect of being human in its fullness, including thinking (mental process), emotions (feeling), and will (volition). Jeremiah's message is mostly a consoling one, but we do well not to romanticize what's happening here: in putting the law in us, in writing it on our hearts, God makes a covenant we cannot break without cutting out a part of ourselves. The good news, however, is that the obedience of those with the covenant written in their hearts comes from their deepest selves. It's not a matter of working harder to make ourselves holy or good. Rather, it's a matter of allowing God to do a "heart transplant" on us, then of accepting over and over that new way of being.

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