A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

“*A Heart of Trust*”

Jeremiah 17

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In this past week’s newsletter, I was musing about Valentine’s Day and how I predicted that I would be one of those guys at HEB at 6 pm Thursday night picking over the cards and candies. I’ve been that guy before, and I know some of you have as well.

Well, I wasn’t. Not this year. Instead, I was the guy driving the car stopped in the middle lane on 25th street and Waco Drive at 9 pm at night, after basketball practice, buying two roses from a guy selling them from the parking lot along with an assortment of pink teddy bears and light up mums. Best two roses I ever bought. The bar is set for next year, boys.

No matter how desperate you get on the next Valentine’s Day, a piece of advice: Do not ask the prophet Jeremiah to write your Valentine’s Day card. You might hope for an affectionate note: ‘be mine’ or ‘I love you’ with a picture of a beach scene or a flower or a big red heart. Jeremiah’s card will picture a shrub brush barely holding on to life in the desert, in an uninhabited salt land. Open the card and your beloved will read, “Your heart is devious above all else. It is perverse. Who can understand it?” This is a great Adele song. It is not a good Valentine’s Day card. You’re better off seeing my friend at 25th and Waco Dr. parking lot.

What is Jeremiah talking about? What a dim view of humanity to say the heart is devious above anything else you might say about it. It’s even dimmer than you might know at first when you realize the fullness of the Hebrew idea of the heart. It’s not just the seat of emotions or love. The heart, the *leb* is everything about your inner self. Your emotions for sure, and also your intellect, your will, your conscience. Its where your deepest motivations and decision making comes from. The heart is your inner self from which you live and know right from wrong. Sometimes we say we make a gut-level decision. I think the gut might be closer to the idea of the Hebrew *leb,* if you realize that by the time you make a gut decision, your intellect and your emotions have already been engaged and are already part of the decision even subconsciously. This is about what’s inside us that makes us who we are and from which we decide what to do and how to make judgments. That’s the Hebrew heart. It doesn’t translate really well into English, but I think we get the idea, or we need to.

Many of us have heard the invitation to, “accept Jesus into your heart.” Have you heard that before? Children often have a really hard time making sense of that invitation. Children are literalists and the heart, they have been taught, is that thing bumping in your chest. How do I invite Jesus into my heart? Is he that little? How would he live there? They are reasonable questions. Adults don’t help much when they don’t help children understand that it doesn’t mean literally the thing beating in your chest. But the truth is that adults are kind of mixed up on this idea as well. When we say, accept Jesus into your heart, we think we mean to ask Jesus into our emotional center. So, Jesus comes and lives in me to help me feel better, to give me warm feelings, and to show me God’s love. The whole way of talking about it becomes individualized, and a little bit self-serving. People who use the invitation ‘invite Jesus into your heart’ and those who scoff at it both have this idea about what it means.

Jeremiah’s Hebrew vocabulary would help us here tremendously. To ask Jesus into your heart is a way of saying, my inmost being, the very center of myself and everything else from there is yours. Everything I have, all that I am, I submit to you. I give to you my emotions, my thinking, my decision making, my will, my conscience, my courage everything about me is yours. When I am baptized, I am immersed completely in you and give you everything. If we talked about faith in Jesus like that, I think we’d be a lot closer to what he calls for when he calls us to believe in and follow him.

A biblical image of a person whose life is given to God is a tree planted by running water. It’s an image of blessedness that comes up here and there through scripture and of course, the final scene in Revelation is of the tree of life straddling the river of life, so that’s the fulfillment of the image. Probably the most well-known version of this image is Psalm 1. The righteous person is compared to a tree planted by streams of living water. The psalm’s focus is on its leaves that do not wither and the fruit that is borne in its season. The wicked, in contrast, are compared to chaff that the wind drives away. The psalm draws our attention to the outward works, the fruit of your life whether it is righteous or wicked.

Jeremiah takes the familiar image in a bit of a different direction. Instead of the outward leaves and fruit, Jeremiah goes down deeper, you might say to the heart of the matter. In Jeremiah, the tree is planted near the water and sends its roots toward the flowing water. The action is forceful. The tree *shoots* out its roots toward the river. Drinking deeply and continually from an everlasting stream, when the drought comes, the tree is not even anxious.

The shrub bush on the other hand is in real trouble. Planted in a wilderness, in salty soil; it is barely hanging on to life as it is. When real trouble comes, when the drought comes, and it will come, the shrub is doomed.

For the psalmist, the difference between the tree and the chaff is righteousness and wickedness. For Jeremiah, it’s something even more essential to our relationship with God: trust. This is about the fundamental dependence necessary for our relationship with God.

The desert wasteland is a picture of trusting in human strength, even your own. The lush river is like life lived trusting in God. You have a choice. Which will you choose? The original context may have been a warning to trust in God instead of their own strength in the face of the looming Babylonian invasion or any number of other attacks they faced from their enemies over the years. Indeed, all through the prophets there is this drumbeat: stop trusting in yourself, your chariots, your horses; trust in God. The implication for Christian life is undeniable, but also totally challenging to everything else we’ve been taught about human development.

Somewhere along the way, we learn some clues about how and when to trust ourselves and our own judgment about things. And it’s true over time as we have life experiences and learn things about the world and ourselves, we learn when to listen to the voice inside of us. I learned a long time ago to listen when a person’s name keeps coming into my prayers or across my mind. More than once, I’ve followed up on that prompting only then to discover why. We learn to trust ourselves and that’s a sign of maturity. And human knowledge can teach us many things. To trust in God is not an anti-intellectual, anti-science, anti-medical care, luddite rejection of everything about the world, as if that were possible, or even what God intended. Yet how do we know the difference.

We have a track record of trusting ourselves too far and become a world of one, an authority unto ourselves. Confidence warps into arrogance. And arrogance becomes self-justification. We can cease listening to wise counsel; stop our ears to the wisdom of the ages; we can disregard scripture’s teaching, especially when it challenges us to change. All of these are dangers we surely must recognize within ourselves. Jesus then hardly lives in our hearts. Jesus is assigned a corner somewhere off behind the spleen or something, the gall bladder, maybe. Jesus come into my appendix, I don’t really use that thing anyway.

How would this even work? Do **not** trust in yourself, your own ideas, your own strength, or that of other people, but trust alone in the unseen God. St. Paul said his whole ministry was based on this challenge: “Some demand signs, some seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, foolishness to the Greeks and a stumbling block to the Jews.” Trust in God, this is the invitation from the Old Testament and the New, from the prophets to the Apostles. Trust in God before things get bad. Trust in God when things go bad. Trust in God when all looks lost. Trust in God when it looks like there’s no way out. When things are going well, keep trusting in God and do not stop. God is trustworthy.

Jeremiah lived it too. Years later when Jerusalem was under siege by the Babylonians, when it was already obvious Jerusalem was going to lose and lose badly; it was just a matter of time, Jeremiah went to the bank and said, all my money please. With that, he bought a small farm outside the city walls. Signing the deed, he said put this is an earthen vessel so it will keep. Things look bad now but there will come a time when farms will be bought and sold again in this land. Trust in God no matter if everything looks lost.

Also trust in God, no matter if everything looks great. If humans are tempted to despair when times are dark, they are also tempted to self-assurance and self-reliance when times are rosy. This is at least as much of a temptation, if not more so. That tree planted by the water, depending on the river for life decides it can do better than trust the river to always be there, so the tree builds a water tower and pumps water from the flowing river into the water tower. When that one is filled, it builds bigger water towers. Then the tree decides a whole grove of trees would be better, in fact is necessary, but that needs water, so it builds a dam to divert the river to its grove. The tree (you following the metaphor still?), the tree is now not living in trust in God, but in trust in itself and its ingenuity. Good for that one tree, I suppose, but bad for every living thing downstream that now live in a dry land. No wonder Jesus sometimes said things like, “woe to you who are rich, you have received your consolation.”

Trust, by its very nature, must be renewed day by day. That was the lesson of the manna in the wilderness, wasn’t it? God provided manna every day, but they just couldn’t take that, so they started gathering it up to save for tomorrow just in case God wasn’t faithful to the promise to take care of them. The next morning, what they had collected had spoiled rotten. In a way, it’s the same story the erstwhile disciple Judas lived out. He trusted in Jesus long enough until he just couldn’t stand it anymore. It was too risky; it was too tenuous. So, he bailed and took Jesus down with him. Or maybe even clearer--it’s Peter’s story, who declared his faithfulness to follow Jesus all the way, until the way got risky. He trusted Jesus enough to get out of a boat and try to walk on water, but not enough to walk with him to Calvary.

We are called to constant, continuous, immersive faith in God in the face of abundance and the face of danger. The word for that is trust, and it is the true meaning of faith. To trust in God. I’m telling you, this is hard. It is good because it is life as God intended human life to be lived, but it is hard because, well, Jeremiah says it plainly, the human heart is devious; it is perverse, who can understand it?

He’s talking about their hearts back then in 600 BC when the Babylonians were coming and they were considering making an alliance with another foreign power to come and help them. Will you trust in God or will you trust in man? Jeremiah’s also talking about his own heart; he knows himself well enough to know that even prophets are tempted to trust in their own selves instead of God’s word, which seemed to regularly get prophets in trouble. And he was talking about our hearts, yours and mine. Our hearts, in the totality of our inner selves. We are sneaky sneaks before we even realize it. We are distracted followers, off alone on trails to nowhere before we even realize we are lost; our loves turn to lusts, our interests turn to obsessions, our call for justice becomes retribution, our foibles turn to habits, our virtues become our vices, tender compassion for each of Jesus’ little lambs turns so sick, and over 380 Baptist ministers and volunteers in the last 20 years sexually abuse someone in their flock. And those are just the ones we know about. We all ought to pray every day: *Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love. Here’s my heart, oh take and seal it, seal it for thy courts above*.

The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse, who can understand it? Even St. Paul wrestled mighty with his own heart, “Why do I do what I don’t want to do? Why don’t I do what I should? When I want to do right, evil lies close at hand . . .Wretched man that I am, who will save me from the body of death?” The problem wasn’t a body of death. The problem was deeper down, inside the body, what assails all humans. The human heart, the inner being; what is inside of us is fickle at best.

The invitation of faith and the soul’s journey in God is a willing submission of our hearts to Christ in love. We don’t have to trust only in ourselves. This is good news. We are not islands of one. We are given the Word of God to tell us who we are, the living Word of God made flesh to redeem us. We are given the Holy Spirit to counsel and convict our conscience. We are given friends and a church and wisdom from those around us and those who have come before. We are given God’s own self, poured out for us, to redeem these hearts of ours that they may be washed clean, the broken places mended, and the rough places made smooth. We are given God’s own self and invited, each of us, to drink from the living water. Drink from it deeply. It is the last command in the Bible: “Let the one who is thirsty come, let the one who desires to take the water of life. “

Drink from the waters of life.

Drink this water, and you will never thirst again.

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