

Lent V B
Jeremiah 31:31-35
March 29, 2009

A few years ago, some friends of mine ran into a roadblock in their marriage. After years of following her husband from job to job, from grad school to new career, the wife began to realize that she had never had a vision for her own life. She felt swallowed up in her husband, like some kind of appendage, taken for granted, beloved, but ultimately ignored. She realized she was dying, spiritually and psychically, in a life she once thought she loved.

In despair and desperation, she left. Moved 80 miles away to a town near her family. Got an apartment. Got a job. Left him behind, saying, “I adore you still. But I cannot breathe in this relationship. I’ve got to get out.”

He was devastated. He never knew that she felt this way. He never had an inkling that anything was wrong until she panicked and fled. He wanted to make it all right, but how could he? How could they go back and start over, from the beginning, and possibly get it right? Separated by mistrust, and misunderstanding, by doubt and by distance, it seemed this marriage would shrivel up and die, as so many marriages do. It seemed that things had gotten too bad, too fast, for any kind of healing or reconciliation. It looked like it was over.

A relationship is an ephemeral thing in so many ways. It completely depends on the willingness of both parties to sustain it, to keep on breathing life into it, to build trust and confidence, minute by minute, day after day, in a thousand tiny ways. Remember that great line from Woody Allen’s movie, “Annie Hall,” when he tells her, “a relationship is like a shark. It has to constantly move forward or it dies. And what I think we’ve got on our hands here is a dead shark.”

I think we've all known relationships like this. Maybe we've been in them ourselves. Maybe we've watched as our parents, or our children, or our siblings or our friends crashed their own relationships on the rocks of indifference or betrayal or boredom. There comes a point when one party or the other can't take it anymore, can't forgive, can't go forward, and the relationship dies.

But what happens if that relationship is not one made between two broken and fallible human beings? What if it is a relationship between the Almighty, everlasting God, who Was and Is and Ever More Shall Be ... and a group of agrarian, Semitic tribes? Our salvation story is a wild romance, and we are the object of God's passion. The Bible tells us that the creator of heaven and earth entered into a romance with a small subset of his creation ... calling Abraham, using Moses to rescue the people from bondage, binding them to God's own heart in a ceremony on Mount Sinai when God asked the people to love him with single-minded abandon, just like a groom proposes to a bride.

But it all went terribly wrong. Year after year. Other gods, other ways. Cruelty to the poor and marginalized. Lofty thoughts of political power. Active neglect and scorn of the ten simple guidelines they had sworn to follow when they became God's people. Over and over, God called his people to return. Over and over, they promised, this time, to do better. Over and over again, they abandoned their promise and forgot the God who loved them with unspeakable passion and devotion.

And they began to wonder if maybe it had all gone too far. Maybe they had actually broken God's heart, finally and forever. It seemed as though maybe they had forgotten God, abandoned God and betrayed God's covenant love so many, many times that God just ... gave up on them.

It was a dark time. It was long ago ... 2,500 years or so, but people haven't changed. We can imagine the despair and the terror as the Babylonians broke down the walls of Jerusalem, burned the city to the ground, and scattered the people. Some, the wealthiest and most influential, were carried off into exile in Babylon, strangers in a strange land. Others, the poor, the peasantry, were left to scratch a living out of the burned-over countryside.

Some, like Jeremiah, fled to other countries. Jeremiah, who had watched it, all of it for years, who had warned the people on God's behalf that they were heading into trouble, who watched Jerusalem burn, weeping and lamenting as the city was destroyed, Jeremiah ended up in Egypt, exiled with other Judeans, torn between his love for God and his love for God's people, watching as the romance between Adonai and his chosen people shattered.

Poor Jeremiah. Was there ever so unhappy a mediator in the tumultuous relationship between God and his people? How it crushed him to speak the words God told him to speak, the words of a husband devastated by his wife's betrayal. Jeremiah had to speak on God's behalf, telling the people things like, "I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness."

And then the accusations: "Long ago you broke your yoke and burst your bonds and you said, 'I will not serve!' On every high hill and under every green tree, you sprawled and played the whore." And finally, the heartbreaking rejection, when God says to Jeremiah, "Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, yet my heart would not turn toward this people. Send them out of my sight and let them go."

And Jeremiah does what the Lord asks, even though it kills him to have to say these words. And the people don't listen to him. They go their own way; they ignore their husband, the Lord. And eventually Nebuchadnezzar comes out of Babylon with his chariots and his armies, and it all ends in fire and destruction and exile.

The Temple is destroyed. The city is burned to the ground. The people are scattered. It looks like the end of the romance. It sounds like the end of *Gone With the Wind*, with Scarlett O'Hara crying, "Where will I go? What will I do?" and Rhett Butler walking out the door saying, "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn."

Except. Except God, so broken-hearted, so hurt, so frustrated and furious with his unfaithful bride, still relents. And he gives Jeremiah other words to say, the possibility of a future, the hope of reconciliation.

Jeremiah tells them, “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God and they will be my people. I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.”

Wow. Can it be that easy? No, it’s never that easy. It’s not easy to put a broken relationship back together. It takes time to heal, time to trust again, time to acknowledge the hurt and the betrayals and to slowly, slowly learn to set them aside.

And even though God wrote his law upon the hearts of those lost Judeans as they returned at last from their exile in Babylon, even though God wrote his law upon the hearts of those fishermen and tax collectors that Jesus gathered around him, even though God wrote his law upon the hearts of the first Christians, even though God has written his law within our hearts, each of us, from the least to the greatest ... can we say that our love affair with God is strong and whole and sound? Can we honestly say that we are as passionately in love with God as God is with us?

Or does an angel have to break the bad news, leaning over to whisper in God’s ear ... “Sorry. They’re just not that into you.”

God, for some mysterious reason, has decided to romance the human race, to woo us as a lover. To walk with us in human flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. To try to live within each one of us like a burning flame of love – teaching us love unspeakably deep and powerful for God. Love unspeakably deep and powerful for one another. Love unspeakably deep and powerful for this whole broken world. God wants our hearts to break for love of him, just as his heart breaks for love of us.

It’s a hard thing to imagine. But if it can happen between two ordinary humans, might it be able to happen between people and their creator? My friends, you see, got back together. Their two hearts were both broken, but broken in a way that called them back to one another, to acknowledge their need for one another, and to work – hard, hard work, on the forces that had driven them apart.

Can it be like that for us and God? That kind of depth, and intimacy, and passion and commitment? I don't know. I think it calls for something very deep on our part ... a willingness to let go and open up, to be cracked open like the seed Jesus speaks about in the gospel lesson. It takes the courage to let ourselves be broken open for God, in the same way that God breaks himself open for us on the hard wood of the cross.

Parker Palmer retells a Hasidic tale that maybe puts it best. In the story, a disciple asks the rebbe, "Why does Torah tell us to 'place these words *upon* your hearts'? Why does it not tell us to place these holy words *in* our hearts?"

The rebbe answers, "It is because as we are, our hearts are closed, and we cannot place the holy words in our hearts. So we place them on top of our hearts. And there they stay until, one day, the heart breaks and the words fall in."ⁱ

ⁱ Palmer, Parker, "The Broken-Open Heart: Living with Faith and Hope in the Tragic Gap," *Weavings*, March/April 2009. (Palmer quotes Jacob Needleman.)