



## **"MUTUAL ASPIRATIONS"**

**SCRIPTURE: JEREMIAH 2: 4-13; HEBREWS 13: 1-8, 15-16**  
**GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC**

**September 1, 2019**

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### **Jeremiah 2:4-13**

2:4 Hear the word of the LORD, O house of Jacob, and all the families of the house of Israel. 2:5 Thus says the LORD: What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthless things, and became worthless themselves? 2:6 They did not say, "Where is the LORD who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who led us in the wilderness, in a land of deserts and pits, in a land of drought and deep darkness, in a land that no one passes through, where no one lives?" 2:7 I brought you into a plentiful land to eat its fruits and its good things. But when you entered you defiled my land, and made my heritage an abomination. 2:8 The priests did not say, "Where is the LORD?" Those who handle the law did not know me; the rulers transgressed against me; the prophets prophesied by Baal, and went after things that do not profit. 2:9 Therefore once more I accuse you, says the LORD, and I accuse your children's children. 2:10 Cross to the coasts of Cyprus and look, send to Kedar and examine with care; see if there has ever been such a thing. 2:11 Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for something that does not profit. 2:12 Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the LORD, 2:13 for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water.

### **Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16**

13:1 Let mutual love continue. 13:2 Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. 13:3 Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. 13:4 Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. 13:5 Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." 13:6 So we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?" 13:7 Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. 13:8 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. 13:15 Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. 13:16 Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

The Word of the LORD.

**Thanks be to God.**

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Question 1: What if I told you that all the political corruption, power hoarding, greed, lying, distortion of religion—all the things that are going on these days on the national and world stage—all of that has been going on for at least 3000 years, maybe longer? How does that make you feel? (Responses from congregation)

Question 2: What if I told you that the Deuteronomistic History in the Hebrew Scripture, and other parts of the Bible—heck maybe the whole book we call the Bible, may have been composed as propaganda – some to prop up systems of political power that some wanted to maintain, maybe some to foment revolution and a complete change of systems? What if I told you the Bible has been deployed to prop up despots and justify torture and that the Bible has empowered revolutionaries? That the Bible has at once justified oppression and violence that have destroyed cultures and has spurred movements of freedom and liberation that have changed the world for the better? How does that make you feel? (Responses from the congregation)

For me, these realities bring on more questions.

As people of faith, what do we do with this dissonance and ambiguity?

Where is God in it all?

Is there any way to know that we are truly doing God's work and not just creating a God and a faith that serves our purposes?

If we truly want our aspirations to be God's aspirations, how do we check ourselves? How do we know the path?

Mutual aspirations have not really been a defining reality in the God/human relationship through human history.

It's a sobering realization really—as people of faith. And maybe that reality is a big reason why so many people don't really see what the point of going to church is.

What difference does it make—the political corruption rages on, the church corruption rages on, the betrayal and harm and brutality rages on?

And on the other end of the spectrum, maybe that sobering reality is why fundamentalism in all faith traditions is on the rise, in the midst of such ambiguity, people want the comfort of something that is black and white.

But that's not us, GCPC—we're not fundamentalists and we're not ready to give up on church—we're the increasingly rare third option—we choose to believe and to

seek the life of faith with full awareness of the ambiguity that comes with this way of life. We seek a better world knowing that we are also a part of the problem.

It's a promising place to be really—spiritually that is. There's room to grow. There's room for change.

But we've got to work against two of the most potent human behaviors that serve the status quo: DENIAL and AVOIDANCE.

We've got to cultivate within ourselves a deep well of spiritual and existential stamina to walk this path—this path of faith that truly seeks a better world even if it means we have to change—especially if it means we have to change.

A little history lesson about our prophetic tradition:<sup>1</sup>

- In 609 BCE, King Josiah died.
- The King of the Southern Kingdom of Israel, Judah.
- He followed King Manasseh who was known for his excessive idolatries and bloody rule—he is reported to have sacrificed his firstborn son to YHWH—a practice that wasn't unheard of in those times. So we can't blame Manasseh for all of that, but that's one of the things our salvation history tells us Josiah got rid of during this reign.
- Josiah was known as a reformer. He got rid of:
  - cultic prostitution
  - child immolation (that's sacrificing children, often by burning)
  - private worship (he mandated corporate worship in the temple)
  - some forms of magic and divination
  - among other things
- Josiah was known for his piety, wanted to restore the Davidic monarchy. He saw an opportunity with the Assyrian decline in the Northern Kingdom—the Assyrians were the colonizing/occupying force in the Northern Kingdom, and they had retreated before Josiah's reign began in 622 BCE.
- But after Josiah died—15 years of political turmoil ensued. The Neo-Babylonians moved in—a new colonizing/occupying force. They dethroned one of Josiah's sons who succeeded him only to bring another one of his son's to the throne that they could manipulate.
- So when Josiah died in 609 a leadership and political crisis ensued. And that's when the Prophet Jeremiah hits the scene.
- Jeremiah brought a hard message to this politically fraught context:
  - The whole political and religious scene is so corrupt, Jeremiah said, that the Neo Babylonians are going to sweep it all away unless the leaders of Judah repented and returned to the social justice teachings that the laws of Moses taught them.

- Both Northern and Southern kingdoms had not adhered to those teachings, and that is why they are being destroyed and occupied, Jeremiah asserted.
- Jeremiah called for a systemic revolution. He even said that the people would be better off without a monarchy, without the cultic/religious system—these things were too corrupt.
- “Values and allegiances” of leaders had to change.<sup>2</sup>
- Jeremiah’s critical preaching got him kicked out of the temple.
- So he had his scribe, Baruch, write up his message on a scroll and have the temple secretary read it aloud to the congregation.
- King Jehoiakim (you know Josiah’s son who was just a tool of the colonizing force) got wind of the scroll and had it destroyed.
- So Jeremiah told Baruch to write the scroll again, and to add some more stuff to it. And that is source of the Book of Jeremiah that we have a version of now.
- One of the things Jeremiah railed against were false prophets—the prophets who told the ruling party what they wanted to hear. He accused them of giving the rulers of Jerusalem false security.
- You see each political program had prophets telling them what they wanted to hear—propping up that political agenda with God language and prophecy.

So, I wonder. Does any of this sound familiar? Do you hear any connections to the situation we are facing today?

This knowledge should humble us, not comfort us.

If we really want the world to change, we, too, have to take a hard look at our values and our allegiances.

What if we are living in the epoch of true transformation? What if we are the generation that finally gets it? That is finally willing to take a hard look at ourselves and our systems and the way we make and keep life together—what if the world is finally ready to make God’s aspirations for humanity our aspirations for humanity?

How do we become healers of the wounds our ancestors have left us with—how do we repair the cracked cisterns that have defiled God’s fountain of living water?

Jeremiah’s challenge reverberates with urgency today—is it too late for us? Has God’s living water been lost on us?

And what are the metrics we use to check ourselves, to assure that our intuitions and commitments to what the life of faith entail are not doing more harm than good?

That's where this Table comes in. What we learn here, how we're called to be changed here is where our attention will be this Fall at Grace Covenant.

Next Sunday you'll hear more about how Eucharist and the pressing need for people of faith to stand up and be counted in our world will frame our journey together these next few months.

When we place Christ at the center of how we navigate the complexities and ambiguities, the injustices and the promising possibilities of the moment in history that is ours, we will have to change, we will have to get better at being faithful.

And the only way to change, the only way to get better is to practice, practice, practice.

The preacher in the Book of Hebrews was pretty much saying the same thing. That preacher was really a cheerleader for Jesus followers:

- Don't give up!
- You can do it!
- Don't forget who you are!

And these closing words of that ancient sermon, to faithful people living in perilous times, invited them to stand up and be counted in a world defined by people closing ranks, hedging their bets, and using violence to get their way.

1 Let mutual love continue. (that is lead and live from your shared aspiration to love one another)

13:2 Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. (that is be generous, be open—everyone has something to teach you, everyone carries a spark of divinity within them)

13:3 Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. (that is be compassionate, be courageous, be in total solidarity with those most impacted by the injustices of the world)

13:4 Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled—(that is be faithful, be trustworthy)

13:5 Keep your lives free from the love of money, (Christians are Christians first—capitalism isn't a Christian system—so Christians have to live in this system with a different set of values and allegiances—remember Jeremiah)

13:6 So we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.

What can anyone do to me?" (Moral courage, spiritual groundedness, religious resilience—but most of all a brave kind of trust in God's movements and aspirations for our lives)

Mutuality  
Hospitality  
Compassion  
Fidelity/Trustworthiness  
God-centered  
Christ-centered  
Doers of good  
People who share

These are some of our watch words as we navigate the fraught times we live in—these things don't come naturally to us human beings—if they did, history wouldn't be looping back through such tragic and brutal patterns again and again.

The only way we are going to change is to practice, practice, practice—let this be our mutual aspiration, Grace Covenant, to stop repeating history and instead join in God's work to make all things new.

Thanks be to God.

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<sup>1</sup> Gottwald, Norman. The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction. (Fortress Press, 1985) is a great source on the history of the Hebrew scripture.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 396.