

In your pews you will find blank pieces of paper, they are there for a reason so I want you to keep hold of those because you're going to use them in a few minutes. Last Wednesday at chapel, I asked my upper school kids to use their imagination for me. I told them that I wanted them to imagine that they had a massive blank piece of paper in front of them, and it was all theirs to decorate however they wanted, but the trick was, they only got to put *one word* on that piece of paper. One word to show the whole world. They had to decide what message they wanted to send to the world with just one single word.

Now, of course, I was dealing with kids, so we got some silly answers, particularly from my middle schoolers—tacos, sleep, the massively long word which is the word for the fear of long words. However, I was extremely pleased to find that the majority of my answers were not silly or frivolous, they were powerful, meaningful, and in their own ways showed what things, what ideas, what concepts were valued *and needed* most by my kids. I wasn't sure if I would have a lot of hands up like I do for silly questions like favorite animals and things like that but immediately hands shot in the air. These were some of their answers: worthy, forgiveness, kindness, love, hope, faith, family, peace, friends.

Questions like this always remind me of how thoughtful our kids are, but also how deeply they too are longing for a world that is kinder, calmer, and filled with more hopeful, positive things than it tends to be. These are kids who are no older than 13, and they can recognize the things the world needs sometimes better than adults can, and on the one hand that gives me hope for the future, but on the other brings to bear the reality that we have not done our job in creating a world that instinctively reveals those positive things to younger generations. When kids who are 8, 9, 10 years old are longing for hope and peace, that says to me that we the adults have not done a great job at fulfilling our commitment to making the world a better place for the next generation.

So why this question? It was this question because our lesson for Wednesday in chapel was our lesson from Jeremiah and at the heart of this passage lies the promise of a blank slate, a fresh start, a new way of moving forward into the world, putting into it what you hope to get out of it, and it all starts with God, and God's once again overwhelming promises to God's people, even when they are at their most undeserving. But to get to the depth of God's actions here, we first have to take a step back and figure out what has happened to get us to the point of needing this new covenant in the first place. What have God's people done?

The better question would almost be what *haven't* God's people done, at least in terms of getting things wrong. These words of Jeremiah's come to God's people as they are in the midst of exile in Babylon, where they have been for almost an entire generation. Now, in hindsight, it can be easy for us to look at the exile and be like, wasn't this a smidge of an overreaction? You send an entire generation of people out of their homeland and into a foreign territory all because you're mad? But that is absolutely the perspective of our 21st century mindset, and completely ignores the years and years and *years* of history that leads up to this point.

From the *moment* the Israelites step foot in the Promised Land after the wilderness wandering, they start straying from God. God has literally just let them out of slavery and into their own new homeland, has fed them, and kept them safe, and the people are like, umm, hard pass, we would now like to do our own thing. Now sure, there are pockets of time where things are going swimmingly. The relationship is good, the people are walking with God, but more often than not once things get too good, things start to crumble. The Israelites become fascinated with their own sense of power, following the ways of their kings who are obsessed with wealth and the gods of other nations. The more diverse their community gets, the easier it is to build walls up and say these people are the in crowd and those people just

need to stay out. Oppression and injustice multiply. Economic disparity grows exponentially, and all the while God keeps sending prophets to get them to change their ways. Over and over again, God pleads with them to stop, to repent, to turn back to relationship with God, and over and over they refused, continuing to go their own way. Even when God starts to warn, hey, if this keeps up, a bad thing, an exile like thing may happen, the people don't stop. Which is how we find Jeremiah and the people in exile.

With that in mind, it makes what happens in our text this morning all the more baffling and incredible. After years of bad behavior and fractured relationships and broken covenants, God decides that the only response to God's people is...a new covenant. Now, we might think in light of everything that has happened that the new one will be harsher, stricter, with far more caveats and consequences to this relationship. Instead, God says this is going to be a brand new covenant, and God is going to bring everything necessary to the table. The people aren't even going to need to do anything. God is going to put the law in their hearts, they will instinctively know who they are and to whom they belong. They won't even need to teach one another anymore, because *all* of God's people from the greatest to the least will simply *know* they are God's and God loves them. This in and of itself is a massive promise but then God ups the ante. On top

of all of that, God is also going to just flat out forgive what has happened before *and* God's going to forget it. God tells them that God will "remember their sin no more." The past is in the past, it's gone, the slate is wiped clean, and there will be no more talk of what once was, but only what now can be in this new phase of their relationship.

Now on the one hand, for us as individuals, this is a deeply freeing message, because the covenant that God makes with the Israelites in this moment of exile and renewal, also transfers to us. We are a part of this covenant, as God extends to us the same kind of blank slate, clean sweep kind of forgiveness. For us, we connect this covenant with our baptisms and with Christ's death and resurrection, so even though we relate to it from a different angle from our Jewish siblings, the promise is in the same. God binds Godself to us in deep commitment and promises to remember our sin no more, moving forward from this point on to define our relationship with love, grace, and wholesale forgiveness.

While this piece of the message is vital, I don't want to focus on that today, because after all, it is Reformation Sunday, and so at its heart, this is a day about us, communally, us as a church, us as the body of Christ together, us who have committed to being in this relationship together and

who recommit to that relationship every week when we come here, share a meal together, and extend God's peace to one another.

A couple of weeks ago, I sat with colleagues as we all shared our experiences of the last two and a half years, and I listened to the pain, the frustration, the fear, that they have internalized and tried to work and live through in the midst of living into ministry in a pandemic time. It made me realize that there is so much we have yet to and need to face as we transition out of and still through this time. All of us have frustrations and anxieties, anger and grief that have arisen in the midst of or because of the pandemic and in some ways we have confronted them and in other ways we have shoved them to the back of our brains convincing ourselves that we're fine, until they rear their ugly heads at really weird and inopportune times. We bear a lot of those things most likely around the church and our communities and what we faced together and apart.

We bear the frustration of not being here, for months. Not being together, not sharing communion around the table, not singing, not hearing our siblings wish us peace. We bear the anxiety of coming back and being uncertain of our place, of getting sick, of not being sure what things would be like now. We bear the frustration of things being different from what we expected them to be, of wondering where other people are, questioning if we

will be the ones holding up different groups and committees all on our own because we seem to be the few left who care. Through a lot of those things, there is probably anger that arises, anger that things didn't just spring back to normal, anger that our community has changed, anger mixed with sadness that normal is no longer a word we probably can use anymore. We need to name those, it's true, but I also realized that in naming those, we also need to have the grace with one another and our community to make a covenant with a blank slate. In so many ways, we are starting anew, uncertain of what the future holds, and there can be joy in that, if we choose to embrace it, and if we choose to covenant with each other for a renewal of our relationship even if that relationship looks like something completely new.

And this is where we get to the pieces of paper in your pew. We're making literal use of the question I asked of my kids in chapel. This is your blank slate. On that blank slate, you get one word. *One word*. One word to represent our covenant together as a community. What do you want your siblings here to know, to feel? Upon these pieces of paper, we in some ways make our own 95 theses, declaring who we want to be from this day forward as a community together. So take this time...write your word...and as you come up for communion lay them in the basket in front of the font, where we are washed anew, blank slates for love. **AMEN!!!**