

“Generosity: A Way of Life”

By the Rev. Eric O. Ledermann

October 20, 2013 – 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time (RCL, Year C)

University Presbyterian Church of Tempe, Arizona

Jeremiah 31.27-34 (NRSV)

²⁷The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of humans and the seed of animals. ²⁸And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the Lord. ²⁹In those days they shall no longer say:

“The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.”

³⁰But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge.

³¹The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³²It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. ³³But this is the covenant

that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

2 Timothy 3.14-4.5 (NRSV)

^{3.14}But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, ¹⁵and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that everyone

who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

^{4.1}In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: ²proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost

patience in teaching. ³For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, ⁴and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. ⁵As for you, always be sober, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

Lillian Daniels is the pastor of First Congregational Church in Glen Ellyn near Chicago. She is also an author and contributing editor to the *Christian Century*, a magazine I highly recommend and read regularly. In her most recent book, *When “Spiritual But Not Religious” Is Not Enough*, she tells the story about visiting with a financial planner soon after she became a minister. She tells how it felt a bit awkward as she and her husband didn’t have much to save, in fact they had no investments and were deeply in debt—as most people are when they finish school. She tells how she and her husband had made some progress reducing their mountain of debt, but still had a long way to go. They had become tithers at their church, that is giving 10 percent of their income. She quips about how it is odd

enough to give 10 percent to one's church as a member, but notes that she was the pastor, and how even more odd it is to basically give 10 percent of one's salary back to one's employer. She feared the financial planner would look at their mountain of debt and encourage them to be more "sensible" about their giving in order to pay off the debt. She writes:

"So when we got to the subject of charitable giving, I told him we were tithers.

"Tithers, huh?' he said. 'Is that ten percent of after-tax income or pre-tax income?'

"After tax, of course,' I said. After all, we were tithers, not fanatics. There was a long awkward pause, and I asked, 'So what do you think of that?'

"It's fine,' he said, 'if all you want is an after-tax blessing!'

"Then he laughed joyfully. Turns out, he was a tithing member of a church himself. His philosophy of financial planning had extreme generosity at its core. God had clearly sent a prophet our way, and he had issued us a challenge."¹

It is a challenge to follow Jesus, and I don't think it has ever been easy. Jesus challenges us to think differently about the world, to see the world and all its wonder through the eyes of a loving and compassionate, though very just, God. Jesus reveals to us the truth of God's hope and desire for humanity and for all creation, the hope shared through the prophets of old and new, the desire revealed through new covenants when the old ones had worn out and no longer worked to capture the people's attention or imagination.

The prophet Jeremiah shares God's desire to shape yet another covenant with the now broken kingdoms of Israel and Judah. The people are reminded of God's covenant with the once united kingdom of Israel through Moses as God "took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt." This time the covenant would not be written on fragile clay

¹ Lillian Daniel, *When "Spiritual But Not Religious" Is Not Enough: Seeing God in Surprising Places, Even the Church* (New York: Jericho Books, 2013), p. 97-98.

tablets. It will be written on their hearts, it will be a part of their inner being, their essence, their DNA--it will be their identity.

I believe that in our present age and location that the message Jeremiah, combined with Paul's message of perseverance to his disciple and friend Timothy, is a message that needs repeating: God is, once again, doing a new thing, calling the people back into covenant, and it won't be easy. As Paul tells Timothy, and as Jeremiah shares elsewhere in this writing, this new thing will require commitment to a vision, it will require sacrifice, and it will require discerning and trusting God's wisdom over our own.

Next Sunday we are doing three things in response to this new thing God is doing. First, we honoring the bravery of those who about five hundred years ago realized the wayward ways of the Church and stepped forward, risking their very lives, to speak out and name it. People like Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, and so many others, many whose names have been lost to history. They gained a glimpse of God's vision and saw through the fallacy of the Church's exercise of power and domination at the time. They attempted to bring the faith back into the hearts of God's people.

The second thing we will be doing is celebrating the ministry and fellowship of UPC, one of the results of what happened two thousand years ago as well as five hundred years ago. After worship we will be led to a catered luncheon, catered so that we may all share in the breaking of the bread with one another, with no one within our fellowship being responsible for serving. At that luncheon the purpose and program is simple: gather, eat, and share in one another's company as sisters and brothers in Christ. That's it. In fact, I would say that is the most important part of next Sunday. When we gather and share in one another's lives, we are living into the vision of God's kingdom which has come near. When we gather we are standing with one another in the hard work of discern God's call on our lives together, reminding each other that we are not alone in the struggle of living faithfully (no only do we have God with us, we have one another), and we have the opportunity to realize and remember that we are so much more able to be who and what God intends for all humanity when we are together rather than separate. So if you haven't

made your reservation for the luncheon yet, I hope you will do so today. This week some of our officers will be calling people who have not responded to ask them to come to the luncheon.

And the third thing we will be doing is remembering all these things as we share in the ritual of renewing our commitment to God through this community of faith in considering what percentage of our household income God is inviting us and calling us to commit to the work and ministries of this church. So often we think of financial planning as being about building security for us and our families. Well, are we not sisters and brothers in faith? Is this not our spiritual family? But even beyond that, Jesus challenges us to think differently about what we have been given, and I'm not just referring to our money and physical possessions. Through Christ God has given us life, new life full of hope and promise. It is not a life without pain and suffering, but even in the pain and suffering Christ calls us to sing our song, "Hallelujah, praise be to God!" In this discernment I do not believe God is asking anyone to put themselves in the poor house, so to speak. But I do believe God is calling us to trust that we will have what we need to live. I want to stress one thing: the luncheon next week is not about whether or not you are able to make a financial commitment next year or how much, it is about sharing the fellowship of the church and celebrating what God is doing among us.

I and your elders realize that sometimes there are seasons in our lives when we must make difficult decisions, and I hope you will consider what season you are in this week as you discern what percentage of your income God is calling you to give next year. Next week come having looked at what you are giving this year, having spent time in prayer, having talked with your family if that is appropriate in your context, and discerned what percentage and with a dollar amount per week ready to write down. It is not about the percentage or dollar amount so much as the intentional and prayerful discernment and simply showing up!

God is once again shaping a new covenant for our day, founded on God's sense of generosity, forged by God's understanding of compassion, and continually shaped by God's

ever demanding justice. As both Jeremiah and Paul tell their listeners, this new, yet somehow very ancient, covenant is written on our hearts and many of us have been instructed in it since childhood. Let's learn it again and keep learning and relearning it, and then learn to trust the promises God makes to us in our baptism of grace and inclusion, and remember why it matters what we do here, not only to us but to the covenants and your church officers will be holding you all in prayer this week as we, once again, turn our hearts and ears toward God to discern and listen, and learn to trust what we hear as we continue to discern what has already been written on our hearts. Amen.