

The Mystery of Faith

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“I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. . . .” -- Jeremiah 31:33

Just over two years ago, I preached a sermon on the dark mystery that lies at the heart of evil. Some of you may remember the occasion if not the sermon itself. It was the Sunday after T. J. Lane killed three students at Chardon High School, physically wounded three others, and inflicted a still unknown amount of pain on people in and around Chardon, northeast Ohio, this country, and across the globe. T. J. Lane wished to write himself into our history books, and he succeeded, which tells me that we need to write history differently.

Why someone would do such a thing and show not the slightest sign of remorse afterwards remains a mystery. In the search for answers for an unanswerable question, psychologists, social workers, law enforcement officials, and lay people like us all began to speculate about the cause: Lane’s broken and violent family; his unhappy personal life; his previous brushes with the law; his reading and viewing habits; his attraction to firearms.

At the end of the day, there was no explanation. Plenty of guesses, but no real explanation for this seventeen-year-old’s murderous rampage . . . except one: he chose to do it. That’s why he killed and wounded those people – he chose to. Why he made that choice remains as much a mystery today as it was on that February morning.

On this March morning, I’d like to hold up for you the other side of the coin of the mystery of evil, and that is the mystery of good. I do so prompted in part by this morning’s text, and partly by conversations that have been engaging our midweek Lenten study on forgiveness, about which I’ll say more in a moment.

First, today’s text, part of the thirty-third verse of the thirty-first chapter of the book of Jeremiah, in which God says this: “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.”

This verse is a promise and it is a mystery. It is a promise of the covenant God will make with the people of Israel – or at least with some of the people of Israel – after their present days of trouble are past. Jeremiah was writing during the dark and chaotic days just prior to the Babylonian invasion and destruction of the kingdom of Judah six centuries before Jesus. Judah was what remained of what had once been the united monarchy of David and Solomon – Israel as it was called – but which had broken apart after Solomon’s death. The ten northern tribes kept the name Israel, while the remaining two tribes took the name of the larger southern tribe, Judah, which became Judea, whose people, *judaioi*, gave the world the name Jews. Their capital city was Jerusalem, and at the time of Jeremiah, Jerusalem was about to be destroyed.

Babylonia, where southern Iraq is today, was the menace that had risen in the east, and like empires today, it tolerated no opposition to its expansionism. When a coalition of smaller, weaker countries to its west, including Judah, sought to resist Babylon’s control, invasion, destruction, and deportation was the swift and ruthless response. Both Judah’s people and its leaders knew that resistance meant disaster, and

for decades the rulers of Judah had attempted to preserve their nation through a policy of appeasement and playing off the interests of Babylonia and Egypt against each other. That strategy was failing, Babylonia was preparing to invade, and Jeremiah knew it and said it. And no one wanted to hear it.

Fear gripped the nation, and the people of Judah looked to both their political and religious leaders for a way to stop the slide into anarchy and political oblivion. In their desperate search for answers, the people appealed, as frightened people always do, to authority figures to do something – anything – to disperse the gathering clouds of a hopeless war. Religious officials doubled down on religious observance – call an assembly, proclaim a fast, offer sacrifices – and perhaps disaster would be averted.

But the prophet Jeremiah wasn't impressed with the efforts of priests to use the law of the Lord as a political tool. He had seen the failure of the law in the hands of a few seeking to manipulate and control the many. Attempting to impose the law by external means was a tragic failure in Jeremiah's eyes, and the only hope for Judah that the prophet foresaw was in God's promise to take the law from a handful of experts and write it on the hearts of ordinary women and men – to re-create the people of God, in other words, from the inside out.

And even though we still keep trying to legislate morality from without, a religious genius named Jeremiah saw two-and-a-half thousand years ago that the only true and lasting religion comes from within. Religious rituals may express spirituality, but they do not create it. If we are to be saved, it will be by the law of God graciously written on human hearts, and not by the laws of God chiseled in stone on the courthouse lawn.

And there is no knowing, finally, why some people will allow God to do that writing on their hearts and others will not. There is no knowing, finally, why some people will incline their whole lives toward God, and others will not. There is no knowing, finally, who will, in this sense, be saved, and who will not. Goodness, expressed in history and transcending history, like evil, is at its heart a mystery.

This notion of the mysterious nature of goodness came up this past Wednesday in our Lenten study of forgiveness. In Chapter 5 of her book on that topic, Marjorie Thompson recounted some true stories of people who chose to forgive those who had grievously wronged them. One of those people was Ronald Carlson, the brother of a woman hacked to death with a pick ax by Karla Faye Tucker and Danny Garrett in 1983. Garrett died in prison in 1993 and Tucker was executed in 1998. As Carlson learned more of the horrendous abuse Karla Faye Tucker had suffered as a child, and as he came to see some of his own troubled life mirrored in hers, he gradually released the hurt and anger preventing him from forgiving his sister's killer.

"I asked God to take the pain away," Carlson told a Lutheran gathering the year following Tucker's execution, "and to replace it with love joined by passion so that I could forgive the people who had destroyed my family."

It's hard for most of us to imagine forgiving someone who murdered a loved one, and yet somehow, miraculously, it happens. God's law – a law of forgiveness, of mercy, of peace with justice – that law, through the mysterious working of God's grace, gets written on human hearts and expressed in human actions. We don't know how, and we don't know why it happens in some people and not in others, except for this one fundamental reason: people choose to allow it to happen. What all the stories of people living grace-filled lives have in common is that they chose to allow themselves to be used by God.

We cannot save ourselves from the brokenness and pain that disfigure human existence, and every scheme and every ideology that has claimed that ability has, sooner or later, itself become a source of pain and brokenness. We are saved by God's grace, as

we read in last week's epistle lesson from Galatians, and that grace is a gift – a divine, mysterious gift – waiting for our acceptance.

We can, like Ron Carlson or Phyllis Ferguson, the mother of Demetrius Hewlin, another student killed at Chardon, choose to accept that gift of grace, or we can, like so many bitter, angry, and broken people, refuse it. Just days after her son was killed in Chardon High School, Phyllis Ferguson told a journalist, "I taught Demetrius not to live in the past, to live in today, and forgiveness is divine. You have to forgive everything. God's grace is new each and every day."

Phyllis Ferguson was at the 7:30 mass at The Church of St. Mary in Chardon on that Monday morning when her son was killed less than a mile away. Is there a connection between attending mass regularly and forgiving your child's killer? I'd like to think there is. I'd like to think that what we do in places like this helps us become instruments of God's grace in places that are not like this: places of suffering, places of conflict, places where horror erupts suddenly and unexpectedly. God promised long ago through the prophet Jeremiah that the law of self-giving love would be written on the hearts of all those willing to bear that divine message in a world made dark by sin. People like Ron Carlson and Phyllis Ferguson show us that Jeremiah did not prophesy in vain.

I'd like to close this morning with another story about the mystery of faith at work in the world.

Some of you may have seen in last Sunday's paper the profile of Cuyahoga County Juvenile Court Judge Michael J. Ryan. Ryan grew up in the poverty and violence that afflict far too many neighborhoods in Cleveland. He is the son of an addict-prostitute mother who died when Ryan was thirteen, and a wife-beating, drug-abusing stepfather. Ryan broke what he calls the "cycle of failure" through a combination of books from the Cleveland Public Library, the Christian faith he learned by being taken to church by his aunt, and through the team sports at which he excelled in high school. He acknowledges the debt he owes to so many people who helped him through his troubled childhood, including those who provided the meals he received at school and didn't receive on the weekends and during the summers.

"We were forced to just bear it to the next day," Ryan says of the hunger that plagued his childhood home. "There were many nights I simply cried or rocked myself to sleep to avoid thinking about eating."

Through the mysterious working of God's grace – grace expressed in countless acts of loving kindness – Michael Ryan chose to depart from the trajectory his natal family established for his life. He opened his heart and mind to God's grace, as he had seen others open theirs, and that made all the difference. And now Judge Ryan is trying to make that same difference in the lives of the young women and men who come before his bench.

I'm grateful to Lynne Jones for enabling me to bring Judge Ryan's story to your attention this morning, and I hope you'll remember his story in a few weeks when we write to our leaders asking them to continue to support the child nutrition programs that had such an impact on Judge Ryan's life. There's no guarantee, of course, that any given child on whose behalf we'll write will make the choices that Michael Ryan made. That mysterious transaction is between that child and God. But we can show, through our actions, that God's law of compassion and justice has been written on our hearts – and that the prophet Jeremiah, so many centuries ago, did not preach in vain.