

Christ Is Risen! Now What?

Jeremiah 31:1-6
Matthew 28:1-10

April 16, 2017, 7:30am
Faith Community

Over the years the people of Israel had accumulated a less than exemplary record of behavior. Actually, they had elevated griping to an art form.

During the exodus they complained about not enough food, and when that was taken care of, they wanted more variety.

They questioned Moses' leadership and Joshua's sanity.

They regularly felt overwhelmed, outnumbered and undervalued, and didn't mind saying so.

In the midst of God's supernatural care they would gripe, belly ache, moan, protest, grumble, object, and find fault.

It got to be a pattern that they would turn away from God and then run right back crying for help when times got tough.

Today's passage is no different. The people were a mess. The prophet Jeremiah had spent forty years trying to get them to pay attention and straighten out. What he got in response was ridicule, poverty, jail time, physical abuse and death threats.

Now you'd think it would be time for some self-righteous "I told you so's." You'd think God would zap the whole lot of them and start over. You'd think that. But instead, they found grace in the wilderness. That's the way it reads in Jeremiah. The mess they'd made was met with these words, God speaking through the prophet:

I've never quit loving you and never will....And so now I'll start over with you and build you up again, dear virgin Israel. (Jer. 31:3, 4)

God gave them a clean slate and restored their dignity.

That is grace, love with no strings attached. We're loved just the way we are, warts and all.

On my first trip to Guatemala, knowing that I was to speak any number of times, I asked Terri, our missionary there, if there were specific things to try to communicate to the Guatemalan people. She came back with one word: grace. Even there the people feel they have to earn their way to God. It's not just living a good life, whatever that might mean; it's doing certain things in a certain way. The problem there is the same as here. It doesn't work. It's never enough.

In the early days, as he was just starting out, Jesus got baptized. None of this touching of the head with a wet hand, it was a full-bodied dunk for him. When he came up out of the water, people heard a voice. It was God's voice. "This is my son, in whom I'm well pleased." The amazing thing was that he hadn't done anything yet. Not a thing. He didn't have to earn his way; there was nothing to do; there were no people to influence, dues to pay or ladders to climb. His father was pleased with him, just the way he was.

Friends, there are people who wait a lifetime to hear that. Some never do. Maybe some of you never have. It may feel like you've never been good enough. And you've never gotten over it. Try as you may, you still come up empty every time.

Some of you have a problem with God because you have a problem with one or both of your parents. Maybe it's another relative or friend, someone you looked up to and even trusted. Now you don't let anyone in, let alone God. Instead, you keep up a good front. You may be highly successful, but no one knows you, and however hard you may try, the emptiness never goes away.

Maybe the shoe's on the other foot. Maybe you're the culprit. You let someone down big time, and you've never gotten over it. You don't taste God's forgiveness because you've never forgiven yourself.

I learned long ago that most of the time people stay away from church or refuse to believe in God, not because of intellectual or faith issues. Instead, they've been hurt or feel used. They've felt bored to death or profoundly disappointed. Usually God has little or nothing to do with it.

Jeremiah talked about people finding grace in the wilderness. Maybe God put you in your wilderness because it's the only way he can get your attention.

A few years ago in Brighton we relived the story of the prayer cranes. A two-year-old girl living in Hiroshima, Japan, survived the atomic bomb but developed leukemia because of it and died at the age of 12. There's a legend that says if you can fold 1,000 paper cranes, your wish will come true. She made it to 642, and her friends finished the job after she died.

One Sunday morning we each got a sheet of paper and wrote out a prayer. Sunday school children did the same thing. They were collected, and people set about folding them. In the process those prayers, one by one, were offered to God. Many of us felt we were taking part in something holy, which of course we were. We felt honored

and humbled at the same time.

We found prayers of desperation, and prayers of joy.

Marriages were in trouble.

There were secrets too heavy to bear but too terrible to tell.

There's gratefulness for promises kept.

People are thrilled because Jesus is so real.

And then on Easter Sunday morning, worshipers arrived to find all those prayer cranes strung across the sanctuary.

One of the leaders of the project sent me an email to tell me what she learned. Listen to this:

1) Reading the prayers has made me really think about how I may regard my fellow worshippers -- you never know what sort of burden a person may be carrying inside.

2) There is such a great sense of hope that pours out of a community that offers their prayers to God.

3) Like the old hymn says, "Are you weak and heavy laden, take it to the Lord in prayer."

Maybe you need to hear the same thing. Maybe you need to hear what God said through Jeremiah so many years ago:

I've never quit loving you and never will....And so now I'll start over with you and build you up again.

Friends, whatever you've done, you are loved.

However you may feel, you are loved.

You've let people down. You are loved.

You've been hurt beyond belief. You are loved.

You try so hard to prove yourself. You don't need to.

You've been short-circuiting and self-destructing as far back as you can remember. You can stop now.

Someone else has paid the price. There's no need for you to do it.

The single most frequently repeated command in the Bible is this: "Don't be afraid." You see it twice in our New Testament lesson. One time an angel says it. The other time it's Jesus himself. I think there's someone here who needs to hear that as well.

I've never quit loving you and never will....And so now I'll start over with you and build you up again.

(Jer. 31:3, 4)

It's time for a clean slate. It's time to get your dignity back.

It's called coming to Christ. It's letting yourself be loved, just the way you are.