

“In the Flesh”

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Based upon Jer. 31:31-34; John 6:51-60

In Franz Kafka’s disturbing short story, *The Penal Colony*, there is only one punishment for those who get out of line in any way. At the whim of the officer in charge, those who break the rules or cause offense, are sentenced to receive an education by machine. The machine is not a computer designed to teach them better behavior, however; it is a torture and execution device. The convict is strapped face down onto a bed in the middle of the machine. Then a top section called the Harrow is lowered down over him so that a thousand needles can write on his back the lesson that he should have known. The machine keeps engraving, over and over, deeper and deeper, until roughly six hours later, when the convict has been pierced straight through by the needles. When a visitor to the colony sees the machine in action, he is shocked and disgusted. But the officer in charge almost worships the machine; for he claims that in the moment right before the men die, they truly learn their lesson, not just in their minds, but in their flesh.¹

Although I first read this story decades ago, the horror of it has remained etched on my mind ever since. So, part of me cannot hear Jeremiah’s promise that God will create a new covenant by writing God’s word on our hearts without thinking about it. Jeremiah is kind of scary prophet at times. Of all the prophetic books, his contains perhaps the most words of condemnation of the people of Israel and Judah. They had forgotten the Law; they had forgotten their identity; they had forgotten their promises and their God. Although Jeremiah tried to persuade them to change their ways, they wouldn’t listen. Consequently, not too far into his book, he gives up telling the people to change, and tells them instead that they are going to reap what they sowed. In the penal colony which was Babylon, they would finally learn the hard way the consequence of their sins.

Given the seriousness of their sins, one might imagine that God would want them to learn their lesson through a punishment even greater than exile. But thankfully for us all, God did not think like Kafka. In today’s prophecy, Jeremiah doesn’t promise that they will learn in exile by being engraved to death. He offers them a second chance, not a death sentence. Tonight’s prophecy is about God forgiving the people’s sins, freeing them from exile, and putting a new covenant in their hearts by means of grace. Since having words etched in stone didn’t work for the people, God was going to make it so that they wouldn’t have to be taught the Law in order to know God or do the right thing. God was going to put God’s words on their hearts. The new covenant was going to be about relationships and forgiving grace, not rules and punishment.

Although there is no question that when Jeremiah first offered these words of hope to the Jews in exile, he meant that God would redeem them soon, not redeem other people hundreds of years later through Christ. But even knowing that, almost from the very beginning of the Church, Christians have still heard a prophecy about Christ in his words, in part because Jesus seemed to

¹ See Franz Kafka Online, “*The Penal Colony*,” Ian Johnston trans., at <http://www.kafka-online.info/in-the-penal-colony.html>.

use them himself in the last supper he had with his disciples, the supper we celebrate tonight. According to the apostle Paul, he said, “This cup is the new covenant, sealed in my blood, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.” (1 Cor. 11:25). This is the gift we are given through Christ, the gift of a fresh start, the gift of a new promise, the gift of a relationship grounded in forgiving grace not punishment.

But Jesus doesn’t actually say the “new covenant” words in the *Gospel of John*. John’s is the only one of the four canonical gospels which does not include a last-supper-Passover-meal-turned-Eucharist. Instead, he includes a meal when Jesus washes his disciples’ feet and tells them to serve others as he has served them. If we want to find Communion talk, or the promise of new life through Christ in *John*, we have to go back to near the beginning of Jesus’ ministry not the end, when he fed five thousand-plus people with a few loaves and fish. As those of you who have been taking my Tuesday morning class will remember, in John’s gospel, Jesus performs this miracle himself without the help of the disciples. He takes the bread and the fish, and he multiplies them, and then personally gives them to everyone in an almost sacramental gesture, telling them that he is “the bread of life.” It’s a magical moment, until Jesus breaks the spell with creepy flesh talk. “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.” (John 6:54-57).

“Ewwwwww!” the crowd, and even some of Jesus’ disciples cried. “What does he think we are, cannibals?” All this eating flesh and drinking blood-business still makes people uncomfortable today. Just as we don’t want to think about words being engraved in our flesh, we don’t want to think about taking in Jesus’ flesh. Although we know it’s a metaphor, it’s still gross. But just as Jeremiah was trying to get at something important with his heart-engraving metaphor, Jesus was also trying to get something important across to the crowds who were following him around hoping he would feed them. To know God truly, to obey God faithfully, and to be in relationship with God now and forever, we have to take God inside us. We can’t just take the blessings God gives us as if God were a vending machine. We also can’t just quote what Jesus said to his followers as an intellectual exercise. In *John*, the kind of faith that enables us to have eternal life now and always is an abiding-kind of faith. In other words, we must strive to dwell in Christ, and allow Christ to dwell in us. We don’t have to eat Christ’s actual flesh to do this, but we do have to take him into our own. We have to let him get under our skin and wiggle his way into our hearts until it is not really we who are calling the shots, but Jesus directing us and showing us the way. We have to eat, according to the Greek in this text, like a wild animal, ravenous for what God gives and unwilling to leave a morsel behind.

The Reverend Mary Birgelaitis tells the story of a three-year-old and a five-year-old who were playing on the floor while the adults finished dinner. Lisa, the older one, opened a toy nurse’s kit and convinced her brother, the younger of the two, to be her patient. She took a little stethoscope out of the bag and placed it on her brother’s chest. Listening intently, she suddenly announced, “I hear somebody walking around in there.” The adult smiled knowingly, but Ryan, the three-year old, then surprised them all by revealing a deeper wisdom: “Why that must be

Jesus,” he said matter-of-factly.²

Do you feel as though Jesus is walking around in your heart? At the stage of the story we are recognizing tonight, Jesus’ disciples didn’t, not really. If Judas had, he would not have betrayed Christ. If Peter had, he would not have denied him. If John had, on Easter morning he would not have cared more about proving how great he was by beating Peter to the tomb, than about Jesus, and if Thomas had, he would not have doubted. But not long after Easter, all of them were changed enough by the risen Christ to allow him to abide in them. They took Christ into their hearts and gave the rest of their lives to letting him teach them and lead them. They became his flesh, his hands and feet, serving others as he had once served them, and in so doing, they changed the world.

Deuteronomy 6:6, which is part of the sacred text in known as the *Shema*, says, “And these words that I command you this day shall be upon your heart.” According to a Hasidic teaching on this passage, a disciple asked a Rabbi, “Why does the Torah tell us to ‘place these words upon your hearts’? Why does it not tell us to place these holy words in our hearts?” The Rabbi answers, “It is because as we are, our hearts are closed, and we cannot place the holy words in our hearts. So we place them on top of our hearts. And there they stay until one day the heart breaks open and the words fall in.”³ I like that image. God had put God’s word on our hearts in Christ, and is just waiting for our hearts to break open enough to let them in. Sometimes a tragedy in our lives does the breaking, sometimes a tragedy in the world. Sometimes an insight from Bible study, or an act of service, does the breaking. But I think that John was also right, that there is an element of will involved in this. We can choose to open our hearts, or to keep them closed, choose to take him in, or keep him distant and outside of ourselves.

Tonight, I pray that having the knowledge that God desires for us only forgiveness and new life, not punishment and death, will be enough to open our hearts wider than they have been before. I pray that as we take and eat the bread and cup we will do so as those who are ravenous for a relationship with God. I pray that having learned from the mistakes of the first disciples, we will allow ourselves to be vulnerable enough to God’s grace that Jesus will come and walk around inside us, making a home in our flesh, so that we may be more faithful servants of others. Take and eat, watch and wait, and learn the lesson of God’s saving love, for your sake and for the sake of the world. Amen.

² *Animating Illustrations with “Heresies of the Heart,”* a sermon on Jeremiah 31:31-34, HOMILETICSONLINE.COM, Mar. 17, 1991, retrieved April 10, 2019 from https://www.homilecticsonline.com/subscriber/printer_friendly_installment.asp?installment_id=2763

³ As quoted by Rabbi Joel Mosbacher in “*Hearts Broken Open*,” a sermon delivered Yom Kippur 5776, retrieved April 12, 2019, from <http://www.bethhaverim.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/YK-day-Hearts-Broken-Open-web-version.pdf>