

Welcome

Good morning everyone - i'm Ashley and I'm a part of the teaching team here at Catalyst. Something that many of you know about me (and if you don't you'll come to realize today) is that big, heavy feelings are... well, kind of my jam. Like.... I love books, conversations, movies, etc that will make me cry.

[Notebook] And you know what the best rom com is for that? The Notebook. And the scene that gets me every time is probably the scene that you all imagined: where they're standing outside of her car and he is begging her to stay but only because she wants to and he says, "i want all of you, forever."

Man.... brings a tear to my eye just talking about it. And as I was preparing this sermon, that scene kept coming back to me and i thought to myself, "hmm, that's a pretty good image of God's love for us." And you know what? It is. So, i want you all to go home and watch that movie and that's all for this week. Thanks for coming, we'll see you next week!

Okay, now obviously that was a joke, but i think we talk so often about how God loves us, but it just ends up feeling like a movie scene. We sit here and listen to whoever is up here talking about how God loves us and maybe it brings a tear to your eye and then you go home/leave the movie and go back to your regular life.

I know for me it's a lot easier to do that. Because if i really sit down and think about it, do i really believe that God loves me? I mean... the obvious answer because i'm sitting here is "of course i do." but if i'm honest with myself? I mean... no... not really.

And if that's the case then I really don't feel like I should be here at all. I might as well just go home because i'm not a perfect christian who has everything figured out. And... maybe some of you feel the same. So, I want to pose this question to you: what if living into this reality of God's love is the way to real faith/true transformation? Can you imagine that life? Where you are ACTUALLY transformed by God's love and not just sitting around a theater listening to it and then going back to your normal lives?

Meditate on that while we sing this next song together and try to bring to the surface all of the feelings about not truly feeling loved...

Message

I know a lot of Christians these days who feel like Black Sheep - the one who doesn't fit in. Not from the larger culture, but from the Church. Now that's not necessarily a new phenomenon, but then usual message when you felt distance from the Church was because you were drifting from faith.

Today, though, a lot of the folks who are feeling this sense of isolation, of being the weird one - it's not because of weak faith. It's actually the opposite. And it's not because they're drifting or backsliding or wandering from their faith. It's actually our faithfulness to Jesus that's making us feel like outsiders to our own faith. The people who claim to represent Jesus don't actually look very much like him.

[Timeline] This is the experience of the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah lived in the years leading up to the Exile, one of the most apocalyptic and formative events in the history of God's people. Jeremiah was born into a world in the shadow of the Babylonian Empire, and the little nation of Judah spent decades trying to figure out how to survive Babylon. They made payments to the emperor to keep him from conquering them. They entered into alliances with other nations.

This was the big point of contention, because these alliances involved adopting the other nations' gods - a sort of cultural exchange. This idolatry was a violation of the covenant between God and God's people. It was a signal that God's people didn't trust that God's way would preserve them, protect them and provide for them. The people continued to give lip service to God, but their actions showed they preferred to trust the power of the nations around them. Sound familiar?

If you can relate, then this series is for you. We're spending a couple of months with Jeremiah, to bear witness to his faithfulness and ask what we can learn about how God is calling us as a Black Sheep church today.

We began by looking at how a prophet's work is grounded in a deep knowledge of and love for God - especially important since God's people usually ignore prophets until tragedy strikes. We saw that God hates idolatry so much because it warps us away from who God created us to be.

That idolatry that we talked about last week is part of this cyclical nature of God's people in their faith. We constantly see God chasing after God's people and then after some period of time, God's people turn to other false gods until disaster strikes (namely, in Jeremiah, the exile).

Turn with us to [Deuteronomy 24](#).

Today's passage is really interesting because, as far as we can tell, Jeremiah is riffing on a passage from the Torah -- Deuteronomy 24:1-4. Feel free to turn or click over there while I give you some background. There are two main things you need to know.

Think of the Torah like the constitution for God's people; it outlines how the society is set up and governed. Unlike our constitution, though, Deuteronomy also functioned to regulate interpersonal relationships including marriages, parent-child relationships, etc. This was the place that anyone looked to resolve interpersonal conflict, including adultery, divorce, etc, along with law breaking like stealing or murder.

Let's read Deuteronomy 24 starting in verse 1 because it'll help us understand our reading in Jeremiah for today:

“Suppose a man marries a woman but she does not please him. Having discovered something wrong with her, he writes a document of divorce, hands it to her, and sends her away from his house. When she leaves his house, she is free to marry another man. But if the second husband also turns against her, writes a document of divorce, hands it to her, and sends her away, or if he dies, the first husband may not marry her again, for she has been defiled. That would be detestable to the Lord. -- Deuteronomy 24: 1-4, NLT

Did you follow that? If a couple gets divorced, and then the woman marries someone else and *they* get divorced, God's law prohibits the original husband from taking her back.

Turn with us to Jeremiah 3.

Now flip over to Jeremiah 3. We'll hear Jeremiah cite this law in his condemnation of God's people for their idolatry:

If a man divorces a woman and she goes and marries someone else, he will not take her back again, for that would surely corrupt the land. But you have prostituted yourself with many lovers, so why are you trying to come back to me?" says the LORD.

“Look at the shrines on every hilltop. Is there any place you have not been defiled by your adultery with other gods? You sit like a prostitute beside the road waiting for a customer. You sit alone like a nomad in the desert. You have polluted the land with your prostitution and your wickedness. -- Jeremiah 3:1-2

We saw last week that God's people regularly used the metaphor of marriage to understand their relationship with God. Like a bride and groom, they had entered into a covenant with God. They thought of themselves as God's bride. So, in the terms of the marriage metaphor, idolatry is unfaithfulness.

By worshiping these other gods, they've 'married' these other gods. So according to Deuteronomy - which is God's Law, remember, God is obligated to refuse to take them back. With that in mind, let's skip down to verse 12:

Therefore, go and give this message to Israel. This is what the LORD says: “O Israel, my faithless people, come home to me again, for I am merciful. I will not be angry with you forever. -
- Jeremiah 3:12

So, God takes God’s people back. What’s actually really interesting is that God disobey’s *God’s own law*. God illegally and recklessly takes God’s people back despite their previous action. I mean, that is amazing and wonderful, right? That is such a wholesome view of God’s love for God’s own people. And even more so, Jeremiah offers a powerful vision of God’s redemption plan for God’s people. Skip down to verse 14:

“Return home, you wayward children,” says the Lord, “for I am your master. I will bring you back to the land of Israel—one from this town and two from that family from wherever you are scattered. And I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will guide you with knowledge and understanding.

And when your land is once more filled with people,” says the Lord, “you will no longer wish for ‘the good old days’ when you possessed the Ark of the Lord’s Covenant. You will not miss those days or even remember them, and there will be no need to rebuild the Ark. In that day Jerusalem will be known as ‘The Throne of the Lord.’

All nations will come there to honor the Lord. They will no longer stubbornly follow their own evil desires. In those days the people of Judah and Israel will return together from exile in the north. They will return to the land I gave your ancestors as an inheritance forever.

“I thought to myself, ‘I would love to treat you as my own children!’ I wanted nothing more than to give you this beautiful land—the finest possession in the world. I looked forward to your calling me ‘Father,’ and I wanted you never to turn from me. But you have been unfaithful to me, you people of Israel! You have been like a faithless wife who leaves her husband. I, the Lord, have spoken.”

Voices are heard high on the windswept mountains, the weeping and pleading of Israel’s people. For they have chosen crooked paths and have forgotten the Lord their God.

“My wayward children,” says the Lord, “come back to me, and I will heal your wayward hearts.” -
- Jeremiah 3:14-22a

So, that’s a lot of words. Here’s the Ashley Translation: despite God’s law stating that God is required to turn God’s people away because they’ve been faithless, God doesn’t. And even more than that, it wasn’t a begrudging acceptance, but an acceptance with open arms in a way that invites God’s bride to participate again in the original marriage vows they made. Almost like renewing their vows. This is truly an act of the most holy and Godly form of love there is.

And, that’s like this amazing news, right? This is that part in the Notebook where your heart just swells at this beautiful declaration of love and you know how it’s going to end: the girl is going to say yes and they’re going to live happily ever after. Even you, as someone watching, wants to say yes to him.

Let's take a moment and sing about this amazing, reckless love of God.

SONG

Can I be vulnerable with you for a moment? I want to share *my* initial reaction when i heard that declaration of love: "Well if God loves everyone anyways no matter what they do, then why should I care about changing? Might as well keep doing what i'm doing." And yeah, that's a big ol' pile of shame hiding behind that feeling. And... that's actually how the people respond, too. Listen:

"Yes, we're coming," the people reply, "for you are the Lord our God. Our worship of idols on the hills and our religious orgies on the mountains are a delusion. Only in the Lord our God will Israel ever find salvation. From childhood we have watched as everything our ancestors worked for—their flocks and herds, their sons and daughters—was squandered on a delusion. Let us now lie down in shame and cover ourselves with dishonor, for we and our ancestors have sinned against the Lord our God. From our childhood to this day we have never obeyed him." -- Jeremiah 3:22b-25

Might as well just lay down in that shame and cover myself with my disgrace. I mean, i hear all the time that God loves me - it's in like literally every song we sing. It's in most of the Bible. Why is my first reaction to God's love just shame at my feelings regarding it, instead of celebration?

Now, there's this parable that Jesus tells in the gospels. (And bear with me because I promise it'll make sense in a minute). It's called the parable of the day laborers. It's essentially where Jesus goes to a couple of guys first thing in the morning and is like, "i'll give you \$100 to work for me today." and they say yes and go work for the day. Then about midday Jesus does the same thing - goes to a couple of other guys and says, "hey i'll give you guys \$100 to work for me for the day." and they say yes and go work for him. Then, about an hour before the end of the day, he goes up to some other peeps and is like, "hey i'll give you \$100 to work for me for the rest of the day" and they say yes and go work for him.

Everyone is cool with what's going on until the last group. And they're like, "yo what the heck man? You cheated us." So that's the story, and you want to know where I feel like I fit in it? I'm basically at the very beginning and Jesus came up to me and was like, "hey i'll give you \$100 to work for me." and i was basically like, "mm... nah i'm good. I don't want to." So he moves on to people who actually want to work. But then at the end of the story i'm still offended, like, "hey why did they get \$100 and i didn't????"

That is basically how i act every time i'm presented with God's love. I reject it or don't actually let it sink in and then later when i'm feeling unloved, I feel mad at God about it. And that sounds so completely ridiculous and silly, but I never said i'd get up here and sound smart so... jokes on you.

AND you want to know what's worse? When i started going through this with JR, i realize that THAT idea - the using "shame to hide me" thing is actually just another form of idolatry

BECAUSE it's just another thing that's keeping me away from true love/true transformation. That basically i'm just like the faithless people that follow God. I'm not like Jeremiah here.

I wanted so badly when i was writing this to be a Jeremiah. Why? Because i wanted the moral high ground. Because I wanted to be the good guy. I wasn't like those faithless people who constantly turned from God. I was a good guy! I was doing all the right things. But the reality? I was actually just ignoring all of God's love anyways and constantly living feeling as though I was not loved. Even when my husband said so. Or my best friends. Or my family.

And you want to know God's response to that? It's here in Jeremiah 4:1-2:

“O Israel,” says the Lord, “if you wanted to return to me, you could. You could throw away your detestable idols and stray away no more.” -- Jeremiah 4: 1-2, NLT

In other words, if you wanted to be the Jeremiah in this situation - if you wanted to participate in true transformation from God's love, you know what's stopping you? You.

When God presents you with God's love, the response is not covering yourself in shame and hiding in your disgrace, only to go back to your normal lives. The response isn't even necessarily celebration. The response is exactly what is said here in Jeremiah 4: throwing away the idols. Including the idol of shame and disgrace that I use to hide from true transformation.

And we hear this regularly too, but I think it's easier to use those times like that pressure valve and hide in our shame. Instead, I call you to throw away your idols, pick up your cross, and come to the table.

Communion

It is difficult to hear that sometimes we are what's keeping us from God's loving embrace, but I want to remind you that at the table, God provides all that you need to enter into God's love and mercy. Communion provides sustenance for the gnawing part of ourselves that aches for God's love.

In the last week, how have you received God's love for you?

In the last week, what barriers might keep you from God's love? Yes, including the ones you built for yourself.

In the upcoming week, what barriers might keep you from God's love? Yes, including the ones you build for yourself.

In the upcoming week, how can you build in time for reminders of God's love and mercy toward you?

Prayer

God, we come to you in this time of communion and we ask you for help. We want to believe in your love for us and we want to receive your mercy, but we find ourselves stuck in our unbelief. So this morning we come before you, humbled. We believe, God, please help our unbelief. We know about your loving kindness, but enable our hearts to feel that. As we receive these elements, may they become a spiritual food for us. May that loving kindness and grace we receive begin a transformation in us that cannot be stopped. In the name of your son, Jesus.

The night Jesus was betrayed, Jesus shared this meal with his disciples. During the meal, he broke bread, gave it to them and said, “This is my body, broken for you. Take and eat it.”

When the meal was finished, he gave them a cup of wine and said, “This is my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sin. Take and drink it.”

So now we too eat and drink, and as we do, we remember Jesus’ death until he returns.

Assignment + Blessing