

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word

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First Presbyterian Church

Clarksburg, WV

Jeremiah 31:31-34

I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more. (Jeremiah 31:34 N.R.S.V.)

God Declared a Mulligan

I am a child of God. I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. And I believe he has the power to change my life and your life.

The family was playing miniature golf and it was the little boy's turn. He hit the ball and it jumped off the course and rolled away down a little hill. Immediately he was off after the ball shouting joyfully at the top of his lungs, "Do over, do over!"

Everyone smiled at the little boy's enthusiasm. Wouldn't it be wonderful in life if when you made a bad mistake at work or at school, you could just declare a "do over?" In informal golf there is actually a term for a "do over." It is called a "Mulligan." Sometimes if you mess up really badly on a hole, your opponents may grant you a Mulligan. You get to go back to the tee and start over. In professional golf there are no Mulligans. You make a bad mistake, you lose.

Much of life seems to be like professional golf - no Mulligans. Sometimes the mistakes we make haunt us for years. That is why it is such good news that God has declared a new covenant in our lives, a Mulligan, or "do-over" if you will. In Christ we are forgiven and get to start over fresh.

Jeremiah is preaching to the exiles in Babylon. He is preaching to a depressed and dispirited people who have lost hope. They messed up so badly that God allowed them to be conquered by the ruthless Babylonians and dragged away into exile.

Jeremiah preached to them of hope. There will come a time when God will make a new covenant with his people. It will be a different kind of covenant, one that is written on their hearts. And God promises that in that time, "I will forgive them and remember their sin no more."

In Jesus Christ's work on earth, his death, and his resurrection, God has fulfilled that ancient promise. In Jesus Christ we are granted another chance, a "do over." I invite you to look at this more deeply with me.

In the old covenant, God gave the people the law, but they were unable to keep it. In the new covenant, God gives us not only forgiveness in Jesus Christ, but also the help of the Holy Spirit. We don't have to do this all on our own.

Sometimes we get so mired down in sin. The mistakes of our past seem to have us in an iron grip, and we can't get free on our own. We want to change some destructive behavior, but we can't. I am reminded of a cartoon once of a man standing in one of the old, round metal bathtubs. He had apparently been trying to lift himself off the ground by pulling up on the handles. The caption read, "I believe I could have done it, if the handles hadn't broken."

Every one of us is addicted to sin. We may not all be addicted to drugs or alcohol. But all of us have destructive behaviors in our lives that we can't seem to break. We are all addicted to sin. We cannot get loose on our own. We cannot lift ourselves, no matter how hard we try. The good news is that in Christ we are granted forgiveness and help.

So what does this help look like? For some few people, God seems to grant an instant miracle. Some people instantly lose their attraction to cigarettes or whatever is enslaving them. For the overwhelming majority of us, however, it is a much longer process. Instead of instantly taking away our temptations, God instead walks with us through our struggles, and when necessary he carries us. For most of us it is a one day at a time struggle. Sometimes it is a one hour at a time struggle, or even a one minute at a time struggle. The good news is the certain and sure promise of God that with his help all things are possible. We need not be enslaved by our past. Christ is steadily and surely making all things new.

Look back with me again at this scripture and notice that God promises to write the new covenant on our hearts. Most rules and laws start out as external things. As children we obey the rules because our parents are forcing us to do so. But when our parents aren't looking, we break the rules. The goal of parenting is to help our children internalize good behavior. We call that learning how to exercise self-control.

A society is not changed by stricter laws. A society is changed when people's hearts are changed. Jesus Christ came not to bring us new laws. Jesus Christ came to change our hearts.

If you hear nothing else today, I want you to hear this. Jesus Christ changes people.

That has a direct bearing on how we live our lives. There is a saying in the business world that, "The best predictor of future behavior is past behavior." If you are looking to promote someone into a more responsible position, you look for someone who has demonstrated good, responsible behavior in the past. There is enough truth in that saying that most of us don't believe that people can really change. We say things like, "Can a leopard change his spots?" "I think not!"

Yet as Christians we are reminded that Christ can and does change people. That calls for a different response on our part.

The story is told of a young woman who was into drugs and prostitution. She stole. She lied. She was not a nice person. She started attending a Christian church and in time she gave her life to Christ. The pastor's son saw the change in her and the two started dating. After a suitable period, the two announced that they were going to get married. This caused quite a stir in the congregation and many people were grumbling. They pointed out to each other the rather sorry past this young woman had, and they hurried to save the pastor's son from making a terrible mistake. They even went so far as to hold an intervention meeting where they hoped to convince the pastor's son to change his plans.

The young man listened to the church folk rant and rail against his finance and point out again and again her sordid past. Finally he managed to get in a word. He said, "My finance is not on trial here. What is on trial here is your faith in Jesus Christ. Do you believe that the blood of Jesus Christ can wash away sin or not?"

Every Sunday I invite you to say with me, I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. And I believe he has the power to change my life and your life. Those are not just words. Christ does have that power. We recognize and affirm that truth when we encourage people in the changes that Christ is making in their lives.

I am always so proud of you as a church when you live out that message. You invite people in who are hurting. You support those who are, with God's help, changing. You give people second chances. You say to each other, "You may have failed in the past, but you are not a failure. You are a child of God. With God's help you will succeed. For with God all things are possible."

One more thing I need to say, and this is important. God not only forgives other people and changes other people, God forgives you. God changes you.

Listen again to God's word in Jeremiah. "I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more." Do you have some past sin or failure that you are still kicking yourself about? It is time to let that go. God has already forgiven you. Why are you still dragging that around, letting it weigh you down? It is time to forgive yourself. Let the past failures go. Take God's hand and let him lead you into his future.

As the Apostle Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians 5:17: "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"

I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. And I believe he has the power to change my life and your life.

Amen.