

March 18, 2018: Fifth Sunday of Lent (Year B)
 Jeremiah 31:31-34: Promise

“If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.” I imagine most of you have heard that phrase before. It’s a timeless piece of advice, a lesson on the value of persistence. It reminds me of the story of The Little Engine that Could. The small locomotive that was unexpectedly tasked with the job of leading his train over a very tall mountain. As he struggled against nearly impossible odds he repeated a single phrase, over and over again, “I think I can, I think I can, I think I can.” And he did. It also brings to mind the paraphrase of a well-know quote of Winston Churchill, spoken in reference to the efforts of Great Britain to fend off air attacks from Nazi Germany. “Never give up. Never give up. Never, ever, ever, give up.”

It’s all really good advice, but it needs to be understood in the context of another phrase; well really it’s more of a definition. “Insanity is doing the same thing, over and over again, each time expecting a different result.” There is a fine line between being a persistent person and being a crazy person. If you try over, and over, and over again to accomplish something, and you continue to fail, and you are a sane person, you will realize that whatever it is you are doing is not working. That a new approach is needed.

Maybe you decided you wanted to lose a little weight, so you latched on to whatever diet was popular at the time. First it was the Atkins Diet. You lost a few pounds, but then you gained it right back again. Next you tried a shake for breakfast, a shake for lunch, and a sensible dinner. Same thing. There was also the South Beach Diet, and the Five Bite Diet. You even read that terrible excuse for Biblical scholarship, *What Would Jesus Eat?*, which led to the Mediterranean Diet. The results were always the same. None of them led to accomplishing your ultimate goal, so you decided a new approach was needed. It took the form of making serious, permanent changes to your lifestyle.

Trying to lose weight is just one example. It could be any number of things that you tried to do, and failed miserably, over and over again. I remember one time, many years ago, I tried to get this girl to like me. I tried to act really cool around her. I tried to be outgoing, super confident, tuck in my shirt, brush my teeth, comb my hair, things like that, and none of it worked. She wouldn’t give me the time of day. I decided I needed to take a new approach. I should just be myself. That actually did work. She felt so sorry for me she married me.

I want us to think about all this in the context of our theme for Lent this year, rehabilitation, or “rehab” for short. People enter rehab because they want or need to make a change in their lives. They are seeking a new normal. There are all kinds of reasons why someone seeks rehabilitation, but our focus has been on that with a spiritual dimension, where sin is involved. Maybe it’s an addiction, or a habit or behavior that is not pleasing to God, or an area of our life where we want to become more like Jesus, maybe less selfish or less materialistic, or more compassionate or forgiving.

The first Sunday of Lent we talked about the importance of entering into the wilderness, that place where we are exposed, vulnerable, and undistracted. Next, we talked about responding positively to an intervention and seeing them as an opportunity for growth, or being willing to stage an intervention in the life of a fellow believer. Then we talked about embracing the program that God has given us, specifically the Ten Commandments. Finally, last Sunday, we talked about recovery, and how the only way to experience it was to look upon Jesus, lifted up on the cross.

Today we are going to talk about the experience so familiar to anyone who has entered rehab, of trying over and over and over again to achieve a full recovery, only to fail, realizing that whatever they were

doing wasn't working, a new approach was needed, but they were at a complete and total loss over what that might be. Maybe you can relate to this experience. The Israelites certainly could.

The Israelites had tried for many years, even centuries, to keep their covenant with God, but they just couldn't seem to do it. First God made a covenant with Abraham. He promised to bless him with land, descendants, and that he would be a blessing to the nations. All Abraham had to do was go where God told him, and get circumcised. This covenant was passed down through the generations, to Abraham's son Isaac, and then to Isaac's son, Jacob. They each had their shining moments, but they didn't exactly follow God perfectly. They eventually wound up as slaves in Egypt for 400 or so years.

Then God sent Moses to deliver his people from slavery. Once free from Egypt, God's covenant with his people took on an ethical dimension, with the giving of the Ten Commandments. These were later expanded but they could be boiled down to two, love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. Really it was a call to faithfulness. The people of Israel were to be faithful to their God, and faithful to one another. They failed miserably, not once, not twice, but too many times to count.

One way the prophets of Israel tried to illustrate this unfaithfulness was to compare the covenant between God and Israel to a marriage, where God was the husband and the Israelites were his bride. We have an example here in these words from the prophet Jeremiah. In effect, what Israel had done was cheat on God with other gods, over and over again. Finally, God had enough and allowed the Babylonians to conquer them, destroy their beloved city of Jerusalem and the Temple, and force them to live in exile, scattered throughout the Babylonian Empire.

You've got to believe that as the Israelites mourned their loved ones who had died in the invasion, and tried to make the best of living in a foreign land, they thought to themselves and said out loud to one another, "Whatever we are doing to stay faithful to God and to each other, it's just not working. We need a whole new approach." And that was true. But God was thinking the very same thing. He needed to do something different, something new, to make their faithfulness possible.

What God said he was going to do for them was really quite remarkable. He was going to make a new covenant. This time it would not be written on tablets of stone, but on tablets made of flesh. What God expected of them would be written on their hearts. We associate our hearts with our emotions, but for the Israelites their heart was the location of their will, the command center of the body where decisions were made.

Being faithful to God and to one another would become almost second nature, the thing they desired to do, instead of the intense struggle that it had always been. And each person would know God and God's will. They wouldn't have to rely upon a priest to communicate it truthfully to them, or someone to constantly get on their case about living in obedience. This kind of thing would put me out of a job! And all this would be driven by a radical, divine act of forgiveness. Not only would God forgive them of their sin, their sin would be forgotten. And that is something only God can do.

To know your sin is forgiven. To know your sin is no longer remembered. To know that you are loved, for no other reason than love itself. That is a powerful motivator. Maybe the most powerful motivator in the world. This clean slate. This second chance. This newfound power. This personal relationship with a God who loved them was the new approach the Israelites needed to finally keep their covenant with God. Only it wasn't a new approach on their end as much as it was a new approach on God's end. God was going to do something new for them so they could be the people he was calling them to be.

This was not yet a reality. When Jeremiah spoke these words to the people of Israel they were still in captivity, with no sign they would be released anytime soon. Jeremiah had already told them they might as well make the best of it. Settle in, plant crops, make friends, prepare to be there for a while. What he was talking about here was a promise of what God was going to do, in God's time. It was a promise in which they were to place their hope.

As we attempt to experience rehabilitation in our lives, to finally succeed where we have already failed time and time again, our only hope is in the same promise, that God will do a new thing, that God will do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. That he will break the chains of an addiction that has held us captive. That he will give us strength to love someone who has done what we believe is unforgiveable. That he will give us wisdom to make better decisions. That he will give us peace in the midst of a storm we are facing. Whatever it is that we have tried to do and failed, we have hope that God will do something new, that God will do what only God can do and make a full and complete recovery a possibility.

In a very real sense God has already done this new thing in Jesus. In the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection we see Jeremiah's promise to the people of Israel fulfilled roughly 600 years after the fact. Jesus wrote God's law into our hearts through his teachings and his example. What more radical act of forgiveness and display of unconditional love can you find than Jesus dying on the cross for our sins. In the pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon all flesh we see the destruction of any religious hierarchy, and recognize that we all have equal access to God and his power to live the lives he calls us to live.

God has done a new thing in Jesus, but each of us need to experience this new thing for ourselves. Each of us needs to study the teachings and example of Jesus. Each of us needs to know Jesus in his suffering, so that we can know Jesus in the power of his resurrection. Each of us needs to understand that we have been forgiven, that our sins have been forgotten, removed from us as far as the east is from the west. Each of us needs to know how much God loves us. Only God's love will provide the right kind of motivation we need to change. Each of us needs to know the power that God has made available to us through the Holy Spirit to change.

I hope that God has done something new for you as you have taken this journey through the season of Lent. As we follow Jesus, God will continue to do this new thing in us. This was God's promise to the people of Israel in Exile. This is God's promise to us. And this promise gives us hope. This promise inspires us to never, ever, ever, give up in our attempts to experience the fullness of life that God offers us.

Response to the Word – Congregational Prayer

Merciful God,
 Have mercy on our souls,
 according to your unwavering love;
 according to your abundant mercy
 wipe away our sins and the guilt we have carried for so long.

Instead write on our hearts your love
 Your boundaries for our lives
 Your salvation that sets us free from our sins.
 To live the abundant life you have for each of us.

Lord, we want to see Jesus,
We want to love Jesus,
We want to follow Jesus
We want to serve Jesus.

Lord,
Create in us clean hearts,
Renew your spirit within us.
Do not turn us away from your presence,
do not take your holy spirit from us.
Restore to us the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in us a willing spirit.
Write on our hearts, your love O God,
Amen.