

March 22, 2015 – Fifth Sunday of Lent
Prepared by Sr. Connie Krautkremer, MM, Tanzania

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 51:3-4, 12-15; Hebrews 5:7-9; John 12:20-33

In today's first reading we find God trying to work out a relationship with us human beings. The old covenant bond between God and people, with laws carved in stone, had not worked out well and something more satisfactory is being considered. So God decides that our hearts will be responsible for holding the law. God decides to forgive and forget our past failures, and we can go on from there.

The law will be held in our hearts. Let us look at our hearts. A healthy heart is strong and it is soft. Because of its ability to adapt to changing circumstances, it beats sometimes fast, sometimes more slowly. Our lives depend on that flexible faithfulness. So, how is a law in my heart different from one carved in stone? We responsibly obey just laws that govern our lives. But more is expected from a law that is ruled by the heart. Besides obedience, compassion and forgiveness are required of us, and that is a lot more demanding than simply following a rule.

In the gospel, Jesus uses a grain of wheat to teach about obedience, how the seed must fall into the ground and die in order to produce more seeds, food in abundance. It means dying to self, letting go of being so sure I am always right, that my way is the best way, and being ready to forgive and ask forgiveness. Our hearts are softened when we forgive, and, at the same time, the heart must be soft in order to forgive.

I share this story of forgiveness. It is the story of two women who came to a seminar I was facilitating at their parish, in a village in Tanzania. Because of drought there was scarce food in this village of peasant farmers. Trees were cut to make charcoal in order to earn a little money to buy food. Hillsides cut bare of trees caused other environmental problems. The environment was stressed and people were stressed. It was in this context that the women in my story, once friends, had turned against one another. One was so angry she wanted to hurt her former friend. At the seminar everything changed.

The theme of the seminar was how anger turns to resentment and bitterness, which can make us sick and which destroys relationships. The women prepared short plays to show real situations in their lives. The women in my story recognized their anger and behavior being enacted, and knew they didn't want to live like this any more. To forgive was the only way. What happened next was truly a grace. Their hearts were softened; they forgave one another right then and there. Their faces lit up with joy as they told the whole group about the new life they were feeling. They asked me to pray with them in gratitude for the burden they had put down, and for a restored friendship. Like today's psalm, their hearts were filled with joy and they praised God for their salvation.

The other amazing thing was that I had nearly cancelled this seminar at the last minute. The morning we were to begin I watched the village women walk down the road, away from, not toward, the parish hall. When I learned this was the day the government would distribute food to the village, at a greatly reduced cost, I assumed the need for food was more critical than the seminar topic. They were on their way to get their family's portion of food. How could anyone come to a seminar about "spiritual" matters, like anger and resentment, when they are desperate for food! But slowly a few women gathered and we decided to go ahead. Suddenly there were 20, then 30 and then 40 women, and the seminar took off.

What did I learn? That broken relationships are almost as unbearable as a food shortage, that forgiveness is as life-giving as flour. The grain of wheat dies when we forgive, and food in abundance fills our lives.

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