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March 21, 2021

Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
5th Sunday in Lent, Year B

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Show us your ways, O Lord, and lead us in your truth. Amen

Have you heard of the term “cancel culture”? Apparently, it’s been around for a while and I’ve only just recently noticed it—which shows that I’m not as with the times as I’d like to think!

According to the Cambridge online dictionary, cancel culture is “a way of behaving in a society or group, especially on social media, in which it is common to completely reject and stop supporting someone because they have said or done something that offends you.”ⁱ

Even though the term is relatively new, the act of cancelling out people or ideas is as old as humanity itself. It seems easier to cancel someone than to stay engaged when your differences seem to outweigh your relationship. I know I have done it.

I have unfollowed people on Facebook. I have ignored or put off people I didn’t want to spend time with because our time together was stressful or downright contentious. And I know that there are situations when it is necessary to cancel a relationship because it is best for both parties.

I recently watched a TED Talkⁱⁱ given by actor and director, Betty Hart who told about a time when she had cancelled her own father. They had some deep ideological difference of opinion and they didn’t speak to each other for ten years! And it’s not like they hadn’t gotten along before that. Betty described herself as a “daddy’s girl”. Her father adored her, and yet this one rift created a schism in their relationship that lasted a decade.

Do you have relationships like that? For God and the people of Israel, this was an ongoing theme—division and reconciliation, division and reconciliation, over and over again.

Over the past few Sundays, during this season of Lent, we have focused on the Old Testament readings that highlighted the covenants God made with humanity, especially the chosen people of Israel.

We began with the covenant God made after the flood in which God made a commitment to all of creation never to destroy the earth again. Then it was the covenant made with Abraham and Sarah, stating that God would be God to them, and their descendants would be God’s people.

After God called Moses to rescue the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt, God recommitted to the covenant made with Abraham with the giving of the Ten Commandments.

But Israel couldn’t live up to even the first of the commandments, to love God alone and have no other gods. Time and again, through the time of the judges and the kings, the people of Israel turned to the gods of neighboring nations, and followed the selfish ways of the world.

The twelve tribes of Israel experienced their own cancel culture when ten tribes split off and became the Northern Kingdom, and Judah and the priests of Levi formed the Southern Kingdom.

By the time of our reading from Jeremiah today, the Northern Kingdom has been conquered by Assyria and what's left of Judah is about to be taken into exile in Babylon.

It looks like all is lost, that there will soon be nothing left of God's chosen people. It seems like God has cancelled the covenant to be God to these descendants of Abraham. But in the face of death, Jeremiah proclaims God's word of hope with a new covenant.

In her TED Talk, Betty Hart promotes an attitude of compassion to heal the divisions of our cancel culture. She reminds us that the definition of compassion is "to suffer with" another person. After her ten-year separation from her father, Betty decided that their love for each other was more important than their differing opinions on one subject.

She asked her father if they could start over—knowing that they could not go back in time. They both agreed to renew their relationship and move forward together. Thankfully, Betty and her dad made this move in time, before he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's and died.

The new covenant God made with Judah is also based on compassion and forgiveness. God will suffer with them through their time in exile. God will forgive their sin—past, present, and future. The covenants of the past were always initiated by God, and relied on God's faithfulness. God intended for the people to change because of the covenant, but that didn't always happen.

So, God was ready to start over. God is so committed to this relationship with Judah and all humanity, that God would come into the world to suffer with the world.

Our gospel reading today prepares us for next Sunday when we will hear again of the Passion of Jesus Christ. The Son of God came to initiate this new covenant, to show us God's steadfast love and mercy for Jews and Greeks, and all who would be drawn into God's communion of grace.

Each Sunday, as we receive this grace in the meal of Holy Communion, we hear Jesus' words, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin."

The whole of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is the sign of God's promise to be so committed to us that God will suffer with us, and then forgive and forget our ways of hurt and division so that healing and new life can move us forward. With this new covenant God creates in us a change of heart.

How are we to live, then, in response to this covenant of amazing grace? It begins with self-reflection and recognition of our own sin. Psalm 51, which began our Lenten season on Ash Wednesday and we read again this morning, is a good place to start. We even named God's great compassion in the first verse!

We need to acknowledge our sin that injures and cancels and turns us away from God and our neighbor, and offer that sin up to God. By this new covenant we can do that with full trust that God will forgive it and forget it. Then, we can look around us and find ways to promote "compassion culture" over "cancel culture."

This week aggression against Asian-Americans was in the news again. Since the pandemic began, Asians in our country have been blamed for the COVID-19 virus, and violence and abuse against them has escalated. This is just one of the many wounds in our nation that has opened wider over the past year.

The Asian and Pacific Islander Association of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has provided a prayer practice for healing and blessing. It is a practice that uses gestures rather than words. This prayer practice will serve as our Prayers of Intercession after the Apostles' Creed this morning.

Some days it doesn't feel like the law of God has been written very clearly on our hearts. The choices we have to make in our relationships and in the struggles of the world are difficult and it would just be easier to cancel those that are challenging and downright aggravating.

But we have a God of compassion, who is faithful to this new covenant grounded in the forgiveness and new life we have through Jesus Christ. May our hearts and our lives be so transformed by the love we have received through Jesus' passion for us, that we would embrace and share God's enduring compassion for the world.

Thanks be to God. Amen

Embodied Blessing and Healingⁱⁱⁱ

As we learn and pray this prayer of embodied blessing and healing, let us offer ourselves, those on our prayer list, and all who are in need of God's loving embrace and care.

First, I will demonstrate with a brief meaning; then you will follow me; then we will move together in silence.

Take a deep breath. Exhale.

Place hands on heart. I see myself – acknowledge my own feelings – my own body.

Bow. Acknowledging sacredness, resilience, humanity, strength in myself.

Look around. I see you.

Cup hands to ears. I hear you.

Fold arms across chest. Mourning, feeling collective sadness, grief, lament, anger.

Bow. Acknowledging sacredness, resilience, humanity, strength in others.

Open hands, palm up, with a breath. Receiving blessings from God and from one another.

Touch with one hand and extend the other hand to another person. Heart-to-heart compassion.

Let us now begin this embodied blessing and healing together in silence.

Let us begin by taking a deep breath.

ⁱ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/cancel-culture>

ⁱⁱ https://www.ted.com/talks/betty_hart_how_compassion_could_save_your_strained_relationships

ⁱⁱⁱ Worship Resources for Day of Lament Against anti-Asian Racism, Copyright © 2021 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.