



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: March 29, 2009

Upon Their Hearts, Richard B. Griffis

Jeremiah 31: 31-34

More than I'm usually apt to do, in recent weeks I've asked friends, colleagues and relatives pretty much the same question: "I'm puzzled, what should I say to the Round Hill congregation in Greenwich?" My brother-in-law was fully aware of the uproar over the AIG retention bonuses and conversant with the difficulties in our economy. He presumed that speaking to anyone in Greenwich, CT is to speak, as he said, to those who "ought to know better." Claude lives in Manhattan. He reflected a moment further and much more seriously said "Remind them to be who they're meant to be." Claude's intention, I think, was that I be very direct with you, even firm, and expect much from you.

Fair enough, I thought, but what does that really mean? Stepping back a little from the events of recent months, I think you will agree that we are living in extraordinary times, through vast global changes that in various ways are affecting all of our lives; for some not significantly and for some a great deal. In fact, from colleagues and friends way down there in Washington, the mere mention of Greenwich conjured the image of privilege, power and responsibility.

Claude certainly was not alone in giving me advice. You should know that in retirement I spend a lot of volunteer time with the United Nations Association in the nation's capital. I serve as VP for Programs. When I casually said I was joining you for a Sunday during your celebration season observing your move twenty-five years ago from the community house into this beautiful church, I got an ear full. Not on the historical value of exquisite architecture, but on what you ought to be doing to lead in assuring responsible United States leadership in the United Nations and in support for UN work around the world. Unreasonable expectations? In many respects, yes, of course. Yet you should remember that you are more important in some persons' minds than you will ever know.

So, again, against this background and in particular the economic cycle we are in, who is Round Hill Community Church and what are you meant to be? That is essentially the question about which I want to reflect with you for a few moments.

Perhaps especially because I feel the aging minister that I am, I dared not venture further without help. It was my good fortune that one of the lectionary readings for this Sunday is from the ancient prophet Jeremiah. The recommended text – those few verses in Chapter 31 – brings to an extraordinary culmination the prophet's

long agonizing wrestling with God over the faithfulness and unfaithfulness of his people.

I won't linger here except to say that Jeremiah was the most personally revealing, spiritually transparent of the great prophets. His was a career with frequent isolation and ongoing struggles to announce the integrity of God's ways in his convoluted world. It was often a message of doom. However, in these and surrounding verses, Jeremiah seems to wrest from God this spiritually simple and powerful truth: the new covenant. The emerging grasp of a new covenant shaped much of subsequent Hebrew thought and became the foundation for the whole of our Christian testimony.

I read again from the text: The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. . . I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts.

These few verses turned Jeremiah's severest judgments and predictions of doom inside out, so to speak. The things that seemed so essential to the people were doomed. Even the temple, the ark, and even Jerusalem itself, were doomed. And certainly the politics of nations, the priestly leaders - and even the prophets - were doomed. All that seemed so sacred and needed, he announced in the Lord's name, was pretty much doomed. But what then was essential? The prophet invoked the voice of God and proclaimed the radical truth: I will put my law - my guiding covenant with humankind - within them - not over them or before them as in the holy mystery of the temple, or the authority of priests, kings or prophets, or even in the sacred memory of the ark. Not over them in the clever maneuvering of nations, but within their hearts. What, then, is really essential? I will write my guiding covenant with humankind directly and intimately upon their hearts.

Jeremiah's proclamation, his oracle is a spiritually focused and simple hope that the ways of God for us humans would become, in the fullness of God's time, as essential and natural to our thinking, feeling and acting as our pulse beats and our breathing.

Jesus seized upon this understanding of the one God, creator and sustainer of all. In all subsequent Christian thought, we acknowledge the new covenant. As you know well, Jesus' plain spoken message about God's direct and intimate, life transforming love was troubling to some for whom the mystery of the temple was important or troubling to those in which precise day to day rules from the sacred texts were essential. His message, however, echoing Jeremiah's new covenant, was for many others liberating and life-transforming.

Radical as Jeremiah's hope was, it is not strange to our Christian 21st century ears, especially to faith seekers like yourselves, who seek personal directness in our approach to all that is holy: in prayer, in praise and personal reflection. You are in the tradition of those who want to assume that our individual responsibilities in life do not isolate us but actually define us within caring and forgiving and nurturing communities. I don't want to overstate it, but in the whole movement of the church through time, the basic unit is the more or less face to face congregation of the faithful.

But what in the world should be said, reflecting Jeremiah's hope and this message of Jesus, to this congregation of Christians, with your lively minds and full hearts, in Greenwich in 2009?

So, with the innocence of a friend who a decade ago was sustained with affection and purpose for a year in your midst, I am now, from a distance, bold enough to say: Go ahead, examine with fond memories your past, your struggles and accomplishments, but only for a while. Understand what you can of the meaning of your particular journey as Round Hill Church, but don't linger there. Delight in the beauty of this space, but let its beauty and comfort not tempt you into spiritual laziness. "Life can only be understood backward," True enough. But,

as Soren Kierkegaard then said, “It must be lived forward.”

Jeremiah’s proclamation would caution you to not dwell on your past or linger there too long, but instead strain forward in anticipation of what you can perceive God is revealing and what God is expecting of you. What I’m suggesting is that you spend some of time in this anniversary season retelling your story as a congregation in a special way, allowing yourselves time to discover lessons or learnings. Tell each other what you learned from your past that turns you on today. Then, go further and turn your learnings into goals that pull you forward. Use this anniversary season to examine with confidence the national and global agendas, complex as they will be, and enter into a process of rearticulating and vigorously affirming your vision as a congregation. For instance, I’ve heard tell of your struggles years ago with ecclesiastical bureaucracy. One lesson learned, I think, is that you gained the thoughtful strength of strong-minded and articulate laity. How do you turn that learning so that it becomes a goal for this remarkable congregation? The smothering pressures of church authority are no longer your problem but perhaps subtly smothering pressures permeating our lives today might be.

If you already have been doing this kind of energy building thinking together, all I can say, as your innocent friend, is, bless you and thanks be to God!

I’ve found that one of the maxims among several for successful aging – and I try to be faithful about it – is a formidable one: wherever you are, be there! When Anne says to our four year old grandson, that they’re just chattering and chattering, he falls into gales of laughter. There may be among many of us too much chattering and chattering – and twittering. The unfocused mind becomes a curse – for the young and for the old. Where you are right now as a congregation, be sensitive to the richness of the present moment. Try to discern the spiritual depths, the unfolding implications of the present. Slow down, reflect, give yourselves time and courage to share and pray. In this way, you are reaching for the essentials, the fundamental yearnings and values that will shape your various personal futures and your future as a congregation together. Where you are, be there fully, facing forward.

There is something amazingly strong about your history of hospitality as a congregation, going back to the earliest years. Nurture your spirit of hospitality. Make the most of your of your Round Hill Church identity, with vigorous and caring explorations of the most pressing matters in our lives. Be a congregation known to be a community of mature and active listening. Care mightily for one another. Welcome the seeker in your midst. Cherish the freedom to discuss things with mutual care and respect. In all, seek the simple, radical proclamation of Jeremiah, that is, that God is seeking to write upon your hearts a truth that will enrich and ennoble your lives.

There’s no escaping the expectation out there that Round Hill in Greenwich, Connecticut will do good things, whatever that might be. I interpret those expectations to say: Stir up in the congregation a restless attention to justice. Try to be among those today who are fiercely attentive to fairness and to matters of accountability and responsibility. Cultivate opportunities for well informed explorations of the core values that should sustain our communities, our nation and even the global community. In settings of mutual respect, debate the legitimate differences among social programs and political proposals. A church that probes for essential values and encourages a free exchange among differing but kindred minds will be a strong and appealing church in these early decades of the 21st Century.

Finally, nurture your creativity, your appreciation of the full tapestry of life, and your sensitivity to a holy presence that can be glimpsed in moments of singing, speaking and praying. Simply, forthrightly, and humbly, be open to more than what mere humans can bring forth in any moment – in the hour of worship, in

the hour of fellowship, in the church school class, in the meeting, in the hospital room, around the dining room table, at the work site, before the computer, on the soccer field, in the garden, on the road, train and plane, and in the blurry moments of awakening in the morning. You get my point, cultivate as much as you can an openness in any moment to more than we humans can bring forth. Perhaps Madeleine L'Engle, the writer, speaks in sympathy with Jeremiah's oracle. She wrote in *Walking on Water*, "God is constantly creating, in us, through us, with us, and to co-create with God is our human calling . . . Unless we are creative we are not fully alive."

Where you are, be there fully, even intensely, and facing forward.

Though I've poured advice on advice, my intention has been simply to claim the inspiration you were to me fully ten years ago and, bowing to the prophet Jeremiah, to share a few thoughts about your anniversary opportunity: to be fully where you are, self aware, in the present, facing forward.

From time to time, I remember a gentleman – to a young minister, he was a quite old gentleman – who declared confidently in a little conversation we got into about prayer, "My prayer life isn't much. It's this: I wake up in the morning, stretch a little, realize that I'm alive and still moving, and then I more or less shout, "Thank you, God." That's it; that's enough."

Thank God you're alive and flourishing and, thank God, I'm, too. Beyond all the commentary this morning, the heart of the matter is that you are here season after season, opening your minds and hearts in various ways to the embrace of the Holy One who would write upon your hearts.