

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
Jody McDevitt, Co-Pastor

March 29, 2009
Fifth Sunday in Lent
Jeremiah 31:31-34

Can We Really Change?

Jack Boughton was his name. He was one of eight children of a Presbyterian minister in the small town of Gilead, Iowa. If he were alive, he'd be approaching 100 years old today.

Jack was the black sheep of the family, if you will, the one out of eight whose character perpetuated the stereotype of the "bad boy preacher's kid." He was a ne'er do well from childhood, who skipped school, stole and drank, and could say "I'm sorry" as fluently as his brothers and sisters could recite the Apostles' Creed. His crowning disgrace was to make a young farm girl pregnant and then leave town. It was the 1930s; they were a loving and moral family; and it broke everyone's heart.

Especially his father's. Reverend Boughton preached forgiveness and grace, and embodied gentleness and courtesy and kindness—and this lost son of his was the source of the greatest ache in his soul, the deepest grief he carried with him. For 20 years, Jack stayed away. He didn't even come home for his mother's funeral. So imagine the surprise, and the flood of emotions felt when the elderly father receives a letter in the mail from Jack asking for permission to come home, perhaps to stay a while. Trembling, he writes back saying, "yes, yes, please come," and he encloses a bit of cash for the bus fare. The stage is set for a family drama which asks the ageless question, "Can a person really change?" Can someone who has made so many mistakes and hurt so many people and made such a mess of his own life really change?

Jack and his family and the town of Gilead are fictional, the creation of author Marilynne Robinson in her book of a few years ago called *Gilead* followed up in her recent book entitled *Home* (2008, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York). Jack's story is one of those fictional works which probe the truest and deepest questions of families and relationships--and redemption. Jack is the prodigal son. The story gives flesh to Jesus' parable, asking if any human father could be truly forgiving, if any wayward child could be truly transformed, and if any well-behaved siblings could truly learn about reconciliation. How would the parable of the prodigal son really play out in the life of the Boughtons of Gilead, Iowa?

How does it play out in our lives? Can we sinners really change, down deep in our hearts? Can we truly live reconciled lives? For it's not only a matter of changing our behavior, but more truly, a matter of transforming our hearts.

The question is a corporate one as much as it is an individual one. Can societies change? It has hit home for our family, and for some of you, too, as we have watched from afar the resurgence of violence in Northern Ireland in recent weeks. For thirty years those elements of that troubled society who thought violence would accomplish their political goals, or that violence was the answer to violence, terrorized the nation. In the last ten years organized terror diminished as a political process of power sharing and an emerging commitment to a shared future grew. The "Troubles" were over, it appeared. But a few weeks ago, two British soldiers and a police officer were killed in unprovoked incidences, a splinter group of terrorists took credit, and in the aftermath, violent mobs demonstrated—it

felt like we'd returned to the seventies. The deep division in Northern Irish society is still present, despite the progress toward peace of the last ten years. A peace of truce is not the same as a peace of transformation. Can we really change?

The same question pervades the biblical story. To read the story of the Hebrew people is to hear over and over how God blessed the people, but the people abandoned God's ways, made their own bad choices, followed other gods, and when their behavior caught up with them and they had to pay the consequences, they had to ask for forgiveness once again. Over and over, they broke God's heart. And over and over, God gave them another chance to start again.

The exile to Babylon in the sixth century B.C. was the worst of the worst times, and thus the period of the deepest self-examination. It's also the period when the majority of the Hebrew Bible underwent its final stages of editing, so it colors the whole history as we have received it. It was bleak and for many, it was hopeless to be exiled in Babylon, knowing that the great city of Jerusalem had been overrun and the kingdom they thought would last forever had fallen. Then they remembered the warning words of the prophets. They knew in their hearts that their own foolishness and idolatry were at the root of the problem. They were the prodigal children, far away from home. And they wondered, can we really change? Can we ever be reconciled, restored to right relationship with God and with one another? Can we ever go home again?

Here's a word of wisdom for reading the Old Testament. When the people are prosperous and everything seems to be going well, God's true prophets speak a message of warning: Watch out! Don't be too comfortable! But when the people are down and out, full of despair, the prophets bring God's word of hope and comfort. It's always the case.

And with Jeremiah, whose life spanned the decades before and after the fall of Jerusalem, you can practically date the prophecies by the tone of the message. The deeper the despair of the people, the greater the hope in the prophecy. Jeremiah speaks the words we read today, these words of great hope, to a people who are asking, can we really change? Is there any hope for us?

Yes, says Jeremiah, speaking for God, the days are surely coming. Yes, says Jeremiah, God is making a new covenant with us. And this one won't be external, on stone tablets that we can ignore at will. It won't be on us, either, the mark of circumcision—it will be in us. Deeply inscribed in our souls. Our hearts will be transformed by this covenant, so that we will know God as God knows us. God is still our God, and we will be God's people—once again, and forever. This is the word of the Lord!!

Yes, says Jeremiah, there is hope for us. But this hope is not based on what we can do for ourselves. Got that? This hope is based on God's promise, God's faithfulness.

Yes, says Jeremiah, there is hope. We can be transformed—but only by the grace of God.

Only by the grace of God would the exiles discover that God was with them, even in Babylon.

Only by the grace of God would the exiles ever be led home.

Only by the grace of God would their penitence be real.

Only by the grace of God would they ever be restored to right relationship with God.

Only by the grace of God would they ever be restored to righteous community with one another.

Only by the grace of God. Can we faulty, sinful, wicked, failed human beings really change? Yes, says the Bible, but only by the grace of God.

By the grace of God, the hearts of the people of Northern Ireland are being changed. Enough, they are saying, we have enough of this fear and violence. It is hard work to break down the walls between neighbors, it's uncomfortable work because it means facing up to things that aren't fair and right, differences that are disconcerting, and wrongs that "my side" has perpetuated. It's scary to stand up for what's right when for silence has been kept for so long. But by the grace of God, it can happen. By the grace of God, the impossible tangle of religion and politics and community relations can be reformed. I will testify, having been in Northern Ireland both 26 years ago and last fall, that this transformation is happening—slowly—but by the grace of God expressed in the untiring work of Christians of both sides of the divide, working together. Hearts are changing. And when the heart is transformed, behavior follows.

People can change, by the grace of God. Jeremiah lived 600 years before Jesus, but he knew the promise of the new covenant, that God doesn't give up on us. And in Jesus Christ, we are promised that this new covenant is for all of us, every last one of us who are sin-sick and tired of living lives which lack meaning and direction and hope. In Jesus Christ, we get a chance to start over with God, to start over with one another, to start over with our wretched little lives and learn to live a way that is purposeful and loving and just. In Jesus Christ, we are blessed with the grace of God which makes it possible to be changed into the persons, and the collective people, God intended us to be from the start. Jesus Christ transforms hearts.

Do you remember the Hasidic tale I told two weeks ago, about the student who asks the rabbi, "Why does scripture say tell us to place these words upon our hearts? Why not in our hearts?" And the rabbi answers, "It is because, as we are, our hearts are closed, and we cannot place the holy words in our hearts. So we place them on top of our hearts. And there they stay until one day, the heart breaks and the words fall in." (Parker Palmer, "The Broken-Open Heart," *Weavings* XXIV:2, p. 11)

Jesus Christ is the heart-breaker. Into God's broken heart, he welcomes us with our broken hearts, to be changed and healed.

It is because we believe that Jesus Christ transforms hearts, and transformed hearts translate into transformed lives, that we are here today and every day and every week and throughout the years as his church. By the grace of God, we have a message which saves us from desperate and foolish living. We are called to share that message with the world. By the grace of God, we have a word which gives us hope. We are called to live in that hope. By the grace of God, we have a Savior who we call Lord. We are called to do our best to follow his way. And we are assured that when our best falls short, his grace will cover the gaps. Thank God. I know I need that grace. You, too?

So—did Jack Boughton really change? Or did he come home only to break his father's heart once again? Did his father really learn forgiveness? Or did he still harbor anger in his heart against his contrary son? Did Jack's sister Glory, and the rest of the siblings, learn to be reconciled? Or did they choose to live behind a wall of self-righteousness? I'll let you read the story to find out.

But more importantly, let the story, and the biblical stories which inspired it, challenge you to look into your own heart, and examine your own choices, and be honest before God about your own need for transformation. Can our hard hearts be changed? Can our broken hearts be healed?

Only by the grace of God.

Thank you, Jesus.