Jeremiah 31:31-34 (NIV)

31 “The days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah.

32 It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,” declares the Lord.

33 “This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,” declares the Lord. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.

34 No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the Lord. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”
The Babylonians were coming---again. It was inevitable---only a matter of time. This time they would have their way. This time God's people would be unable to stand up to them. God's protection would be unavailable to them.

The people of God knew that.
They expected it.
They had brought it upon themselves.

The God who had cared for them and loved them---the God who had provided for them and given them a land of milk and honey had been ignored too long. They had done whatever they liked and had drifted from the Lord. They had worshipped their blessings without remembering where those blessings had come from.

The first Babylonian attack had been bad enough. The next would do it. The people were going to pay for their sinful idolatry and ignorance. They could turn their backs on God but they couldn't turn and run from the Babylonians.

It was only a matter of time.

About 600 years before the birth of Jesus, God's people found themselves in a mess. The prophet Jeremiah had warned them time and time again. For years he had told them to face God or face disaster. Disaster was now coming to call. Defeat, captivity and exile were on the horizon.

Because of his calling, his personality and the times he lived in, Jeremiah could never be accused of being an optimist. His job was to warn people---people who wouldn't listen.
Yet, as the darkness of defeat and exile approached, Jeremiah delivered a message of incredible promise and hope. His message from God was that the time was coming when the Lord would make a new covenant with God’s people. As they were about to enter the darkest of tunnels, Jeremiah offered them a glimpse of light.

God had made covenants with God's people before. They were relational in that God pledged to be their God and they were to be God’s people.

But there was also a strong element of keeping the Law in order to keep that relationship in good standing. Sadly, after a while, keeping the law simply became a legalistic exercise for them. It was hard to do and their legalism brought about discouragement and frustration.

There had to be a better way. Jeremiah's declaration offered that hope. Relationship, grace, love and care would come to characterize the new Covenant. Legalism would be taken out of the equation. Keeping the Law would still be important. Sin would still be dealt with but the foundation of this new covenant would make all the difference.

Dennis Bratcher wrote this about the new foundation:

"The breaking of the covenant, then, was not the violation of a law that required legal penalty, but the disruption of a relationship that needed healing and restoration."

The foundation shifted from legal to relational. God placed different expectations on God’s people.
Bratcher continues:

"We see here a portrayal of a God who is willing to forgive when there is no basis for forgiveness other than his love and his own desire to restore a broken relationship. This does not mean that God approves of sin, or that sin is not a serious matter. Sin does bring exile. But the exile is not the end. Sin and failure do not derail God's purposes for relationship with his people. Sin is destructive. But it is not beyond God's ability. These people are not locked into a closed future because of sin. Sin is not the final word because God is God!" (Dennis Bratcher, "The Voice" http://www.cresourcei.org/lectionary/YearC/Cproper24ot.html)

Obedience to God was still an important part of having a relationship with God. But, with the new covenant, the obedience would be a response to the wonders of God's unconditional love. It would be the obedience a lover gives to his loved one, not the obedience a motorist gives to the policeman driving beside him.

We know that the rules of relationship aren't there to make life difficult. Rules about fidelity, respect, service and care are for our own good. The rules are meant to guide, protect and help and they go both ways.

There's little point trying to push the limits or get away with as much as we can because we know playing such games actually goes against our own best interests. Rules and obedience, accepted in love, can actually strengthen the relationship because of the foundation of love built upon by both people for one another.
A little boy was riding his tricycle furiously around the block, over and over again. Finally a policeman stopped and asked him why he was going around and around. The boy said that he was running away from home. Then the policeman asked why he kept going around the block.

The boy responded, "Because my mom said that I'm not allowed to cross the street."


Obedience to the rules can keep us close to those we love.

As Christians we believe that the new covenant, promised through Jeremiah's prophecy, was ultimately realized in Jesus Christ. The offer of a relationship with God based upon God’s offer of grace, love and care became a reality when God's own Son came to live and die among us. By offering the sacrifice of His own life, Jesus showed just how far God would go to bring us back to God. By raising Jesus from the dead, God vindicated God’s Son---all Jesus had taught and said and done during His lifetime on this earth was proven to be from God.

Jesus Christ was the ultimate expression of God’s unconditional love for us. God didn't have to send Jesus. Jesus didn't have to come. But a new covenant was necessary---a covenant where God would be our God and we would be God’s people---not because we have to but because we want to---not because we can keep the Law perfectly but because we seek to love God, with God's help, to the best of our ability.

The new covenant made God’s people a part of a family where, as William Willoman says, "the water of baptism is thicker than blood."
We are part of a family where our relationship is symbolized by sharing a table and having a meal together. The substance of that meal has been freely given by our Lord Jesus Christ.

Next Sunday we will come to this table as God's people.

We come as members of the family of God.
We come as members of the new covenant.
We come as recipients of grace, love and forgiveness.
We come in relationship to the One who provides the table.
We come in relationship with all who eat from it here and around the world.
We come as those who have received the hope promised so long ago by Jeremiah.

When we truly think about it, it's enough to boggle the mind.

Harvey Penick was a golf pro whose biggest success came late in his career. He is best known for his "little books" on golf. In reality, Penick never wrote with the intention of making money.

In the 1920s, Penick purchased a red spiral notebook in which he recorded his observations on golf. He kept this notebook for decades.

In 1991 he showed his notebook to a writer and asked if he thought it was worth publishing. The writer told Harvey he thought it could be published and agreed to help him find a publisher.

A short time later the man sent Harvey a letter telling him that Simon and Schuster had agreed to an advance of $90,000.

The next time the two met, Harvey was troubled. He told his writer friend that with all his medical bills there was no way he could advance the publishing house that much money. The writer had to explain that Harvey didn't have to pay anything---it was Harvey who would be receiving the $90,000!
The book was titled "Harvey Penick's Little Red Book", and it sold more than one million copies.

Similarly, when God extended the gift of the covenant to Israel in Jeremiah 31, Israel had the same reaction that Harvey Penick did: "What must we do? What will it cost?"

And they found themselves asking at just the time in their history when it appeared there was no use in trying to do anything, when they had given in to hopelessness.

But God responded to them, as he responds to us in Jesus Christ:

"Just receive. Just receive!"

We come to the table. We come as members of the new covenant. All we need bring to the Table is ourselves.

How wondrous to "just receive!"

(1446)

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