### “The Law Within” Steve Finlan for The First Church, March 17, 2024

**Jeremiah 31:31–34**

31The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. 32It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. 33But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

**John 12:20–26**

20Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. 21They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” 22Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. 23Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. 24Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. 25Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. 26Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.”

Well, Happy St. Patrick’s Day. Many of you have some Irish blood, possibly mixed with other lines, which is the case for me. I hope you enjoy the day, but I won’t be bringing Patrick into the sermon. I’ll be preaching on the two Scriptures, as I always do.

The idea of a law written on the heart was quite remarkable when Jeremiah expressed it. Now we tend to take this language about the heart for granted, but it was Jeremiah who first gave it this significance, as far as I can tell. Isaiah had used the language of a “whole heart” and of “gladness of heart” (38:3; 30:29), but not of something *written* on the heart, or something external, like a law, being *based* in the heart. By using this expression, Jeremiah is making a contrast between an external law and the internal law that motivates us from within, not by a threat or a promise from outside. The inner law is at some tension with the outer law, because they are two different approaches a person can take.

Jeremiah 31 is also the passage where we first hear about a new covenant, which, again, implies some tension with the old covenant. Will you cling to the old covenant, or will you learn the new covenant? There is an implied challenge in Jeremiah’s words. And in these ideas of an inward law and of a new covenant, Jeremiah shows at least two ways in which he anticipates the new revelation that will come six centuries after his time.

Jeremiah pays attention to human motivation, not just to external law. The wholehearted devotion to doing God’s will is tantamount to having the law written on one’s heart. A covenant is an agreement. The agreement Jeremiah envisions involves the promise to keep one’s motives pure and devoted to God. When one’s loyalty is fully heartfelt, one needn’t be scolded or persuaded to be lawful; one is lawful by intention.

There is some overlap with this week’s gospel, although the gospel starts out on a different note. It starts by showing that Greeks sought out Jesus, and that he spoke to them. Then Jesus goes into a strange speech, having nothing to do with the Greeks’ visit, but focusing on self-surrender. He starts with the idea that a grain of wheat bears much fruit if it falls in the ground and dies, implying that his dying will have a powerful after-effect. Then comes the paradoxical saying, “Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (v. 25).

This is a complex principle of the spiritual life, that those who cling to life will lose everything, while those who have a supermaterial goal will gain everything. That’s how I interpret it. It’s not that you have to *literally* hatethis life, but rather that you should value the *next* life more highly than this life. Another way of saying this is that you have spiritual goals that transcend this world; they will endure beyond your death.

You will keep life, that is, keep the spiritual *values* of your life. That is probably what he has in mind when he talks about his servants being where he is. Be where he is, *spiritually.* Place more value on eternal things than on material things. *That’s* being where Jesus is. Sometimes a certain condition or attitude can be referred to as a *place*, as when we say “where are you coming from?” Being in the place where Jesus is means having the same attitude he has; putting value in justice, love, truth, genuine unity and peace, for these are things that transcend the material level. They also are like a heart-written, inward law that can guide your living.

We are called to be heart-law *livers*, eternal life *lovers*, this-world *leavers*, and spiritual value *likers*. We are meant to live these lives here, love the people we meet and enjoy the work we do, but lift our eyes to the prize of eternal life, set our vision on a higher sphere, where truth and spiritual beauty endure forever. Someone who can do this is likely to have a strong sense of their personal calling in life, a calling that also points them on beyond this lifetime.

There is a peculiar kind of role or person that emerged among Russian Orthodox believers called the *Strannik,* or wanderer. Partly it arose out of a desire for holiness, and for an inkling of the world to come (Postic, *Seven Russian Archetypes*, 66). Partly it was a protest against the tyrannies of church and state. The wanderers took on poverty and made a practice of walking to shrines and places that held the relics of saints. Thus the wanderers were pilgrims, and they sometimes travelled in groups or in pairs. Another cause was the persecution of religious minorities. When the Russian Patriarch in the 17th century imposed some mandatory changes in ritual, he caused a schism in the Russian church, and many of the Old Believers, who refused to adopt the enforced changes, became wanderers (Postic, 78). Wanderers were known for their spiritual intensity and seriousness.

One famous wanderer was Grigory Skovoroda in the 18th century. Skovoroda left his teaching job to become a wanderer. Many wanderers were theologically educated, but felt the organized church was too worldly and materialistic. Skovoroda said “the world tried to capture me, but did not succeed” (Postic, 67). He continued to teach, imparting wisdom through discussions with people he met in his travels. He wrote poems and songs, and he was graciously received by many people.

Another famous wanderer was Father Vitaly Sidorenko who miraculously managed to survive as a wanderer in the Soviet Union, although he was often persecuted for his beliefs. Sometimes he had to wander far from a district where he had been beaten by the police. Once he gave an all-night sermon to fellow prisoners, and they repented with tears. He received a beating for this and suffered a thigh injury that caused him to limp the rest of his life (Postic, 73–74). His brother managed to send him to Georgia where he became much beloved, was able to gather many spiritual children, and where he died peacefully in 1992. His tomb is now a site of pilgrimage.

Nicholas Berdyaev said the wandering does not need to be physical, it can also be spiritual, and some of the greatest thinkers and writers of Russia have been wanderers in this sense, not content with following the tyrannical rule of church and state, but seeking an “undivided orientation toward the eternal” (Postic, 67, paraphrasing Berdyaev in *The Russian Idea*). They did not follow the dogmatism of the church hierarchy, but followed the Spirit in their hearts.

These are people who had the law written on their hearts and who walked away from authoritarian churches and governments. Their lives were not often easy, but they were valuable, and their encounters precious. Another example of someone who followed the Spirit as he understood it is Harry Emerson Fosdick. After going to Union Theological Seminary, Fosdick served at a Baptist Church, and then at a Presbyterian Church in New York City. He wrote a sermon called “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” and this led to him being investigated by a Presbyterian board. He withdrew from the Presbyterian church and was hired at Riverside Church in Manhattan, where he had a large congregation and a radio program. He taught that the Bible shows a growing understanding of God over time. Fosdick became the most celebrated pastor in America, and wrote over thirty books. He lived to be 91.

He was a pacifist, but his daughter Dorothy took a practical position, upholding the right of democracies to defend themselves. She worked for Senator Scoop Jackson for decades. She wrote “to do the good that is straight under your nose is vigilant” ([Dorothy Fosdick - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dorothy_Fosdick)). Dorothy and Harry alike were examples of people who followed the will of God as they understood it their whole lives.

Harry wrote about Jesus’ inwardness: “What was first with the Pharisees—a people faithfully observing a mass of regulations—was not first with him: ‘first cleanse the inside of the cup’” (*The Man from Nazareth*, 89). Jesus changed the emphasis from *not* doing “to doing, and from doing to being” so as to encourage real character and overcome the temptation to self-righteousness (*The Man from*, 101). Fosdick said that people have been interpreting Jesus from the beginning, to meet their spiritual needs, and this continues to the present, because we need a “revelation and symbol of God, for pardon, power, faith in divine purpose and courage in serving it” (*The Man from*, 247–48). Jesus gives us information about God and the courage to serve him.

So let the love of God and the affirmation of sincere devotion be written on your heart, where it will motivate you, and you needn’t be persuaded. *Treasure* truth and goodness, which will endure into the next life. Be in the place where Jesus is. Be a heart-law liver, an eternal life lover, and a this-world leaver. Don’t follow religious ideas that are actually worldly and materialistic. Decide to be aligned with the Eternal. Cleanse the inside of the cup.