

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 51:1-12; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33

“Whoever serves me must follow me”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Today’s readings contain a sense of urgency about the new covenant God is making with all people through Jesus Christ. Jeremiah announces, “*‘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.’*” Early Christians understood Jeremiah’s announcement of a new covenant as having been fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Today’s readings allow us to see Christ at the center of the new covenant in two ways. First, Jesus instituted a new covenant in his Holy Supper promising of forgiveness of sin, and Christ is at the center of the new covenant drawing all people to himself through his cross.

Each time we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, we hear Jesus’ words about the new covenant. In the Eucharist Jesus says, “*This cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin. Do this in remembrance of me*” (cf. 1 Cor. 11:25; Mt. 26:27-28). Jeremiah’s promise of a new covenant of forgiveness are fulfilled in Jesus’ words. In the bread and wine, Jesus offers his body and blood as the new covenant of forgiveness for all people.

Early Christians, therefore, quickly linked Jeremiah’s words with their faith in Jesus. The promise of a new covenant, fulfilled in Jesus, means that as we partake of him in his Holy Supper, we are forgiven and strengthened to follow him in lives of service to others. Yet Jeremiah’s promise has not completely erased our need for one another because we still need one another saying, “*Know the Lord.*” As we partake of the Eucharist, we still rely upon one another by the sharing of Christ’s word through words of forgiveness to each another and to our neighbor. In other words, the promise is fulfilled by Jesus dwelling in us. This means we need to stay close to him, receiving his grace in the Eucharist and following him in service to all people in this world.

Jeremiah’s words about God’s law being written upon the human heart were also understood by early Christians as Christ’s word written upon our hearts. For example, 2 Corinthians, chapter 3, reads, “*You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by all, and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with*

*the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets that are human hearts.”* To have fellowship with Christ at his table is to have his word of life written in our hearts so our lives might, like the words of a letter, give life and witness about Christ to all whom we meet. Through your life and your words, you might be the only Bible that someone will ever read. Serve Jesus and follow him so that all whom you meet will have also met Jesus Christ in you.

As when Greek visitors to Jerusalem desired to see Jesus, the world continues daily to hunger for good news. John writes that Greek visitors to Jerusalem came to Philip saying, *“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”* Already as Jesus’ public ministry neared his Passion, cross, and resurrection, the world was beginning to seek Jesus out. Jesus’ words in today’s gospel about drawing *“all people”* to himself, were already beginning to be fulfilled.

Jesus’ words about drawing *“all people”* to himself are needed more urgently than ever today. It is helpful for us to reaffirm the focus of John’s gospel toward the entire world: *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”* This divine love, far greater in scope than human love, extends to all people. Jesus lives to draw all people to himself – all nations, ethnicities, genders, and identities of people. God’s love, joy, and grace are the divine mission extended to all people.

Therefore, when Jesus says *“all people”* he means the new covenant in himself is available to all people regardless of who they are or how they are. Forgiveness of sin comes from him in his Holy Supper, made real in lives of discipleship and loving service to him. Jesus gets at this when he says, *“Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”*

These words strike at the heart of our very human tendency to love our relationships of blood and soil, of kin and country, more than our relationship with Jesus. Jesus’ words remind us that his call to discipleship sets all our other worldly relationships in perspective. This is why his call to deny ourselves is never easy and often misunderstood. To follow him is not to hate family and nation, but to move ever outward from them toward all people in God’s mission of love for this world.

Jesus says, *“Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am there will my servant be also.”* His call to discipleship is to follow him where he leads, taking the road he opens in your life, not the roads others would have you follow. God’s mission of love for the world is mediated through Jesus, as we are gathered into his body, participate in his holy supper, and as

we follow him in discipleship in service to others.

In following Christ the Mediator, there is no longer the “us and them” of families and nations, rather our relationships are transformed through Christ in God’s mission of love for this entire world. The good news is that in Christ all people are gathered into a new family and human community in his body the church. As Christians, we are called to self-denial, following Jesus who is drawing all people of every nation, ethnicity, gender, and orientation into fellowship with him in his body the church.

Yet this remains difficult for us without his grace. Over and over our lives show that we love our lives in this world more than our new life with him. Over and over, we exclude others even as Jesus says he will be lifted up to draw all people to himself. Like the grain of wheat that dies and bears much fruit, can you die to this world so that through you Christ might bear much fruit for the whole world?

Only by dying to ourselves and hating our life in this world, do we gain eternal life. Follow him and he will lead you in your life’s work. Follow him and your life will bear much fruit. Looking back on your life, how will you describe your life’s work for Jesus Christ? As disciples of Jesus, we live not simply for our lives in this world of families and nations, rather, we live for the one who has given us family and nation, and who is drawing us with all people to himself.

In a world increasingly divided by nationalism and partisanship, this is good news. Following him, we look outward onto the horizon of God’s love for this whole world as Jesus draws all people to himself.

Every week, as I climb the stairs to this pulpit, I am conscious of the words “*Sir, we wish to see Jesus.*” If we wish to see Jesus, we must follow him and see him in those who are most different from ourselves.

Jesus was lifted onto the cross for all people in this world God so loves. He had drawn you to himself. Serve him, follow him, and love all people.

He is drawing all people to himself through you. Amen.