

Year B, 2018
Fr. Robert D. Arnold

Fifth Sunday in Lent
Jeremiah 31:31-34; St. John 12:20-33

✠ In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

Current research is suggesting that it takes 10,000 hours of practice to become truly proficient at any skill. After 10,000 hours of practice, the necessary movements are imprinted on the neurons of the brain, carved (perhaps “sculpted” is a better image) into the very muscles needed for the task. That’s the reason I gave up on dance lessons. When I realized that I would continue looking like “Chicken Man” on the dance floor for another 8,000 hours, I decided to apologize to my wife and go back to doing yoga. I won’t become proficient at that either, given my age, even though it’s the only thing I know that has the potential of extending one’s life more than otherwise might be the case. Some say dancing will do that for you too. Still, given the choice between exposing my lack of dexterity on the dance floor to a whole room full of people or stretching in private, I’ll take the private—thank you very much. Some decisions are easy to make.

Which brings me to another interesting conclusion of modern science: some decisions are easy to change. I’ve always operated on the assumption that the most binding decisions are the ones we make of our own free will—the internal decisions that are reinforced by conviction and inner resolve. It turns out, in a recent study by the University College London, that it is those internal decisions that are the most susceptible to a change of mind and lessening of conviction. Of course, every dieter in the world knows this perfectly well. But I always figured that when you’re truly committed and you’ve got your heart and mind set on something, you would be near to unshakable in that decision. Internal decisions, the article states, are not “set in stone”—which is an interesting image, given the lesson this morning from Jeremiah. I’ve always assumed that this “new covenant” Jeremiah promised—the one written, not in stone, but on the heart—was the promise of inner conviction and resolve that would be so strong it would put us beyond the need for external direction. Isn’t that what Jeremiah meant when he promised that it would no longer be necessary to teach the ways of God because everyone would know the Lord ... by heart? Yet, the UC London study concludes that it is those decisions made as a result of external stimuli or direction that are the most likely to be followed and the least likely to be

changed. Jeremiah's prophetic and hopeful word of a new heart may not yet be in our grasp.

It's a bit of a sticky wicket for us preachers. If we are to "set forth [God's] true and lively Word," it requires some biblical history and interpretation for it to shed its light on us. For our Hebrew forebears, the heart was not the opposite of the head. That is to say, they did not think of the heart as the center or originating point of the emotions; they considered that to be the intestines—where you felt something was in your gut. The heart, they thought, was the center of the intellect and values—the place we associate with the brain, or mind. The former covenant was cut with God when he engraved (literally, cut) those Ten Words in stone with the tip of His finger. They were to be the glue which bound God to His people and His people to Him. They were the covenant cut with all the people. They were not simply agreed to, but usually involved the ceremony of bisecting an animal with the understanding that this or worse would happen to us if we did not keep the covenant. These Ten Words of the covenant were established as the foundation of society and each individual. But they had to be taught and relearned by every generation. And we know how that went and how that goes even today. The new covenant was to be written not on tablets of stone but carved into the flesh of the heart—tattooed right onto the center of intellect and values of a person and a community. Hence, no need to teach another since all will have the ways of God inculcated in that center of intellect and values.

And how exactly does that happen? Internal motivation is a good place to start ... but it may still require 10,000 hours of practice! The Christian life includes at some point (or at several points along the way) personal decision. That commitment is always internal and usually emotional. Call it "getting saved" if that's what you're used to, or conversion, or public profession. Whatever you choose to call it, it is that time when we acknowledge a transformation and commitment and, unfortunately for us, a decision that can be easily unmade. As someone said to a first-time visitor to a revival meeting, "It ain't how high you jump that counts, but what you do once you come down." St. Paul declared that we are not under the Law but under grace; but Paul clearly understood that did not eliminate the Law. External directions are not sufficient for salvation,

but that doesn't mean we can go without them. They are the guideposts, trail markers, and the practice routines that produce a covenant written on the heart. Our decisions and commitments are essential, yet still need to be followed by involvement in the shared life and experience of the community of fellow Christians in constant practice of the means of grace where accountability, support, encouragement and the practice of Christian living to keep you on the path to 10,000 hours of Christian practice that will, in the end, write the ways of God upon your heart.

And what of the grain of wheat that must "die" in order to live? We now know, as the first audience may not have known, that a dried grain of wheat can last for millennia and still be edible and cultivable. It's not that the seed has died, but that it's reached a dead end in its potential. Potential is still locked inside, but has nowhere to go and nothing to do without the graceful assistance of "burial". New life requires that the grain be surrounded by the nourishment of earth, water, and then sun. It's in that environment of nurture that the hidden potential of the grain is released. It is in that environment of nurture that the hidden potential of the grain becomes what it is meant to be. Given nourishment and time, the supposedly dead grain is transformed into new life. God gives it a new body as God has chosen. Jesus' act of self-giving—a clear indication of what was written on His heart, released the potential for new life, not only for Him, but for the whole world. There are many ways to help us understand the mystery of atonement, but surely this is one: we have seen the power of self-giving. The glory of the God is revealed in the self-giving of the Son.

"Whoever serves me," Jesus said, "must follow me." Self-giving does not come naturally or easily. It requires an internal decision and commitment in response to the One who first gave Himself up for us. It also requires a lifetime of practice to have it finally written on our hearts. But it is the way that releases all the potential for life—abundant and full life—that gets so often stymied by the dead ends. This is God's new covenant that needs now to be cut into our hearts. Amen.