

For many of us blackboards were central to our education. The teacher would write the assignments on them as well as parts of the lesson. My geometry teacher always started class by calling five of us to the blackboard; each of us were to work out one of the homework problems for the class to see. If we made a mistake it was obvious but easily erased and corrected. In elementary school, a sort of reward and punishment process revolved around the blackboard. If you were good, you might get the chance to bang the erasers together to clean them; getting to see the clouds of dust that you just sent throughout the room. If you were not so good, you stayed to clean all of the boards. If you were really not so good, you got to write about your offense some 25 times or more.

But blackboards are a thing of the past. They changed colors to green boards: a lighter and cheaper material. Then came whiteboards with much improved visibility. With the whiteboard the chalk dust was replaced by the odor of the easy to clean dry erase marker. But woe unto the person who used a regular marker: the mistake of using the wrong marker became almost impossible to erase.

But what do blackboards and whiteboards have to do with Jeremiah?

Its all about the mistakes.

The Romans used wax tablets to write upon. If you made a mistake you could heat up the wax, smooth the surface and start over. The ancient Babylonians used clay tablets. If you made a mistake you could reform the clay and start over. That is unless you had fired the clay in which case your mistakes became permanent.

Even before wax and clay you could always write your message by chiseling it into stone. But woe unto you if you made a mistake.

God gave Moses the commandments written on stone tablets. Not a problem as far as that was concerned: God didn't make a mistake. But mankind's hearts became as hard as the stone of the tablets. And mankind did make mistakes; many, many mistakes. Mistakes, sins, that could not be erased, that were etched into the stone of their hearts. Such severe, collective sin that it led to the exile.

To the Hebrew mind, the heart was far more than just the emotional center of a person, something to highlight on Valentine's Day cards. The heart represented the totality of the

person: the emotions and also the intellect, the center of decisions and morality, the very soul of the person. When hearts were hardened, when they turned to stone, the ability to understand God, the will to make wise decisions, the very desire to please God, much less to love God, all became petrified into non-existence.

But now God is promising to return Israel and Judah to their homes. God will continue to watch over them, to build them up, to provide the stability necessary to plant their crops and harvest them. Yet there continues to be a warning in this message of hope: each person shall be punished for their own iniquity.

And then God promises a new covenant with His people.

But before we explore this new covenant, a few words about Biblical covenants. In simple terms it is not a contract in which if one side violates the terms the other is released from their obligations. A covenant is made when a person in power, or God, promises to do something for another. Yes, the lessor party is expected to fulfill the terms of the covenant. Yet even if they fail to do so, the promises and obligations of the grantor remain in effect.

God had promised, over and over again, to watch over His people Israel. They were expected to fulfill the terms of the covenant; most prominently the commandments and laws that God had given through His prophets. Time and time again the people strayed: their kings committed evil, the people sought other gods, they failed, as Micah so aptly summarized it, to do what God desired: Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with God.

In spite of this, God still honored his covenant but now is offering a new, even more inclusive covenant.

"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. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

Just as writing material has changed over the history of mankind, so has God's choice of communication techniques changed. In the garden, it was a simple voice command: Do not eat the fruit of this tree. Simple. Direct. Yet Adam and Eve soon ignored, or perhaps forgot, this

simple message. By the time Israel escaped from Egypt, mankind had changed and matured. Literacy allowed for written records. The world around them was far more complex. They had learned that they needed more guidance on how to relate to each other and to God. Hence the 10 Commandments and all the laws and ordinances found in Leviticus that God gave to them.

I liken this maturing of mankind in simple terms to how I discussed alcohol with my daughters. When very young the message was very simple: do not drink. As they grew up and matured, the message became far more nuanced: be extremely aware of what happens if you drink, especially if you drink to excess. Some of these consequences can be life altering and can never be undone. Even later, there were discussions about how alcoholism runs through my family's history, the beginnings of which might be too subtle to notice if you are not aware of it.

Now God was preparing to give a new covenant to his people, one that requires far more maturity to understand, much less to fulfill.

The first part of this new covenant is that it will be written on the hearts of the people. While this might sound like a major improvement compared to writing it on stone tablets, the hearts of Israel were not exactly pliable. In fact, as Zechariah would declare: "They made their hearts as hard as flint and would not listen to the law or to the words that the Lord Almighty had sent by his Spirit through the earlier prophets. So the Lord Almighty was very angry (Zechariah 7:12)."

So, even if the covenant were written on hearts, they still had the same problem as the old stone tablets: mistakes were made and they were permanent. To overcome the weight of endless sins, God ordained the annual Day of Atonement. On this most holy of days, the High Priest would offer a sacrifice and then sprinkle the blood of the sacrifice in the inner most room of the temple to atone for the sins of all the people. But the very name of this observance, Day of Atonement, means in Hebrew to cover up the sins, not to remove them. In other words, all the sins of the people were still etched into their hearts of stone but now only covered up.

So God next changed the hearts of the people: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26)." There is progress here, just as there was progress in moving from slate

chalkboards to whiteboards. But there is still the consequences of using the equivalent of permanent rather than dry erase markers on these pliable hearts.

This brings us to the next aspect of this incredible new covenant: all shall know the Lord. Ezekiel spoke of not only a new heart but also God putting a new spirit in the people. It is this spirit that gives to us an understanding of God, that leads us to know what it is that God desires us to do. Ultimately it is also this spirit that gives us the will and ability to be the person God desires us to be. This thought continues in 2 Corinthians 3:3. Paul commends those leading the church in Corinth with these words: "You show that you are a letter from Christ... written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts." The Spirit of the Living God resides within us and guides us.

But we still have the issue of covering up mistakes. We do still occasionally use the wrong type of marker as we write our own histories. And this is perhaps the most amazing part of this new covenant promised through Jeremiah: "For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." This is not merely atonement, the covering up of our sins. This is a total removal of sins; they are totally and completely forgotten.

What are our hearts like? Tablets of stone? Chalkboards? Whiteboards? Or perhaps even the most modern technology of white boards that can capture what is written on them and electronically transmit it to observers?

I suggest that our heartboards, the very center of our beings, need to be soft and pliable, writable by the Spirit of God so that we can better know God, can transmit the word of God to our very inner most beings so that we can better follow God, and be totally erasable so that when God forgives and forgets our sins we can know that nothing has come between ourselves and the God that we worship.

As all of that happens, as our hearts soften and become receptive, the greatest of commandments to love God and to love our neighbor takes on ever broader meaning. We learn how a desire to love and follow God percolates throughout our entire being. We become ever more loving of all people, of all of God's creatures and creation. And we learn to forgive each other as totally as God has forgiven us.

May our heartboards, filled with the Spirit of the Living God, allow us to better know

and follow Jesus, The Way, The Truth, and the Life everlasting.