

**Fifth Sunday of Lent**  
**Grace Church of West Feliciana**  
**Saint Francisville, LA**  
**18 March 2018**

**Jeremiah 31:31-34**

There is a major difference in how we see identity today versus how the Jewish mind saw identity in the Old Testament. For us today our identity is mostly determined by our behavior, by what we do. You are what you do. There is a little story about violinist Fritz Kreisler, one of the most famous European violinists in the 19th century. As he was waiting for a boat to sail to England, Kreisler had an hour to spare before departure. He wandered into a music shop, where the proprietor asked if he could look at the violin Kreisler was carrying. He then vanished and returned with two policemen, one of whom told the violinist, "You are under arrest." "What for?" asked Kreisler. "You have Fritz Kreisler's violin." "I am Fritz Kreisler." The policeman did not believe him. He said, "You can't lie to us. Come along to the station." As Kreisler's boat was sailing soon, there was no time for prolonged explanations. Kreisler asked for his violin and played a piece he was well known for. "Now are you satisfied?" he asked. They were! (*Today in the Word*, December 22, 1992.)

Kreisler identity had become deeply interwoven with what he did for a living. It is the same today for us. We are closely identified with the fact that we are doctors, lawyers, engineers, priests, or businessmen. What we do tells the world who we are. I love pilgrimage every year because during this weekend we become very Jewish. Let me explain, the Jewish mind has a sense of identity that is deeply rooted in history. History gives them a sense of identity and place. In a very real sense, for the Jewish mind, you are because you have been. Your history defines you. A fundamentally important part of this history is the record of God's promises and the fulfillment of such promises since God called Abraham to seed a new chosen nation. This record gives the people an assurance of God's love and of the importance of the nation in relation to the world. God had chosen Israel and through Israel God would bless the world. This is at the center of Jewish pride, nationalism, and identity. This realization imprints a special stamp of approval in their hearts and their minds. They are the chosen people, God's first son! Yesterday, as my family and I were visiting plantation homes, I saw many old images of Jesus or Mary on the walls of homes, and there I saw a little glimpse of how we too have shared a special relationship with God in these parts of the world. Our history tells us that God has been with us from the beginning and will continue to be with us to the end.

Sitting around the campfires or the dining room table, the Jewish family often talked about their special place in human history. God had created them, had protected them throughout their history, had brought them out of Egypt, had made them into a nation, had constantly defended them from the attacks of enemy armies, had given them strong men and women to lead them, had given them David, the greatest of Jewish kings,

and had extended their borders. They were the children of the promise. God often affirmed his love for his nation through Covenants or promises he made to his children.

The Covenants God made with Noah, with Abraham, and later on with David were Covenants whose fulfillment lay in the future, God had said, “Never again will I destroy the earth by water”, or “I will make you into a great nation”, or “Your kingdom will last forever”. The fulfillment of these Covenants was to be a future fulfillment. Better yet, these three Covenants were exclusively dependent upon God. God would protect from floods, God would give descendants, God would put someone on David’s Throne forever. But, there is another Covenant God makes with his people and this is the Covenant he makes with Moses. This is a drastically different Covenant. Whereas in the other covenants, the blessing is not related to human action but to God’s action, in the Covenant with Moses the “express purpose is linked with actions of God’s people in obeying or disobeying His commandments”. Whereas in the other covenants the focus is “on the future and what God intends to do at history’s end”, the Covenant with Moses focuses “on the present and how God will treat living generations”. And whereas the other covenants “state an unchanging purpose and intention of God that will not be changed”, the covenant with Moses is meant to be temporary and to be replaced by a better, New Covenant” (Richards, “Teacher’s Commentary”, 414-419).

The Covenant with Moses was a covenant of works. If the person obeyed the commandments the Lord had given the nation to order their lives, then that person would be blessed. But if a person failed to follow the commandments of the law, then that person would be cursed. It was likewise at the national level, when the nation obeyed the commandments of the law, the nation was itself as blessed. The nation advanced its borders, enjoyed the blessings of progress, and lived in luxury and comfort, and enjoyed the spoils of war. On the other hand, when the nation acted in a disobedient manner, they believed the Law demanded that the nation be cursed. These curses came in the form of pestilence, attacks by invading armies, political insurrection from within, political chaos, and ultimately the loss of the Promised Land and exile.

By the time the prophet Jeremiah comes into the picture the nation had been sliding into a pattern of disobedience to God; into cultic idolatry; into great injustice against the poor, the widow and the orphan; and into unholy political alliances, in direct violation of God’s wishes. The curses of the law were coming and they nation would lose everything the Lord had given them as an inheritance. Yet, in spite of the prophet’s warnings and in spite of the fact that the signs were clear enough for all to see, the nation fails to listen to the prophets and the exile has become a reality.

It is at this time that the prophet Jeremiah begins to preach the promise of a new law. “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.” This New Covenant would be radically different,

in that it would not be a covenant of works. This law would be an internal law, a law of the heart. God said, "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." The Lord would establish a new way of relating, where he himself would write his law in their hearts. In the future a right relationship with God would not be a matter of doing things, but a matter of being. A matter of identity. Human beings would be internally disposed to God. They would naturally gravitate towards God. God himself would create a gravitational pull that would bring his people back to himself. Out of love, God would give his people a new heart, a longing for him, a natural desire to love him and to please him. The law would be a matter of the heart and not a matter of obedience to the law of works.

From the time of Jeremiah the people were anxiously awaiting the coming of the Messiah and the establishment of the New Covenant. Yet, ironically, when Jesus of Nazareth came into the scene preaching a new Kingdom of Heaven, a new way of relating based on love, and a Covenant where humans could be reconciled to God through acceptance of his free gift of salvation through his son, the same people who were anxiously awaiting the New Covenant failed to accept him. This gift was not wrapped in the right type of packaging. This Messiah had no armor and mighty weapons. This Messiah looked like a beggar and was surrounded by people who looked like beggars. How can this man be the one who was to come? And even when Jesus used the Old Testament symbol of the sacrificed lamb whose blood ratified Covenants between two parties; and even after he said, "This is the blood of the New Covenant", and even after he shed his own blood on the cross, many still did not believe.

We are truly blessed today as we remember our common history through reenactments, plantation tours, cemetery walks, and conversations with the many locals helping to tell our story. The central point of that story is that we the children of the New Covenant; we are the children of Grace. We are not perfect and our history is not perfect, but week after week for 191 years we have come to this place to be reminded that God has given us hearts of flesh through his son. God's Son has become flesh in our midst that we may eat and drink of his sacrifice. As he becomes one of us and as we become incorporated into him, we become the people he created us to be. I bid you then, come and eat. On this altar of marble our Lord will become bread and wine for you and I. We get to enjoy the promises that millions of our ancestors hoped for. May we come to this table with grateful and repentant hearts and share in the body and the blood of the Sacred Lamb that secured our salvation for us. The High Priest, Christ Jesus, our Lord, has offered himself up for you and I on this place for almost 200 years. Come before his presence with thanksgiving and offer yourself to him as a living sacrifice. Offer your lives to him, for whoever gives his life to him will save his life, but whoever fails to offer his life to him will lose it. Come and eat and be whole. Amen!