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## Shaped and Shattered | *Covenant*

Leviticus 26:9

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God is seriously interested in a relationship with the universe. God created all things for relationship and God's preferred reality is one of covenant; deep promises both made and given between God and humanity. God meets us in real time, in our historicity, with covenantal relationship.

At times my wife and I get a bit nostalgic. Empty nesting, or seasonal empty nesting is a bit weird. We keep moving into new phases of our life and we find that in each new phase we are letting go of something and taking ahold of something new. The first half of my life I was so focused on holding on, and now much of the second half of my life will be about learning to let go. Let me explain what I mean:

As infants we hold onto our parents' fingers and their hands to keep us safe. As children we strive to hold onto the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic. As adolescents we try to hold onto a place in the world, seeking clarity around who we are and where we fit in. As young adults we hold onto relationships that will bring us a life partner and a higher rung on the career ladder. As we grow into adulthood, we plan to hold on for the resources to secure our future and the future of our family.

That's a lot of holding on. I don't mean to imply that any of that is bad. Those are all good and necessary things. But as I've thought about it I've been struck by how things have changed as I've gotten older, by how much of my life has become focused on learning to let go.

Letting go of my striving to be somebody else and simply be who I am. Letting go of the wounds that I've worn smooth over the years by turning them over and over again in my heart and mind. Letting go of my anxiety about having enough by learning to lean into the "enoughness" of God. Letting go of the fears that have driven me through life and

allowing myself to open like a flag waving in the wind of the Spirit.

There is, I think, one area of life in which living open-handed and open-hearted has always been the better path, and that's the area of relationships. When we come to relationships grasping for what we can get out of them, or holding tightly to the wrongs done to us, we choke the life out of those relationships. But when we learn to let go, when we learn to love with our whole heart without expecting anything in return – that kind of vulnerability is fertile soil for deep relationships to grow in.

As we continue the journey through God's story, we're going to see that that's how God chooses to enter into a relationship with you and me. Listen to these remarkable words through the past 3500 years of human history. God's relationship with Israel was rocky from the start. It wasn't long after God freed the Israelites from Egyptian slavery that the people were already worshiping a golden calf. God had established what's called a "covenant relationship" with the Israelites.

That just means a relationship based on promises. At the center of that relationship was The Ten Commandments. If the Israelites obeyed the commandments, blessing would flow.

And if the Israelites disobeyed the commandments, life would be much harder. Simple enough, right? But it didn't always go well. Over and over again the Israelites rebelled against God, and their unfaithfulness broke God's heart and broke their covenant relationship. In fact, the majority of the book of Jeremiah is a condemnation of the people for their unfaithfulness, for their refusal to live out the promises they had made to God to be faithful.

Even in today's reading God describes their relationship as a relationship between husband and wife. While God had remained faithful, the people had been like an unfaithful spouse.

Which is, I think, what makes today's word from Jeremiah so extraordinary.

<sup>31</sup> *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. <sup>32</sup> It 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. <sup>33</sup> But 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. <sup>34</sup> No 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. (Jer 31:31-34 NRS)*

How does God respond to the people's unfaithfulness? How does God respond to the pain of rejection? Does God choose to divorce the people, to destroy them? No. Relationship is God's highest priority. So, God chooses to form a new relationship the people. God calls it a "new covenant", but this covenant will be different. This new relationship won't be based on mutual promises.

In this new relationship God makes all the promises, because God knows that we're incapable of keeping our promise to be faithful. But God does keep his promises and the promises that God makes are incredible. God promises to write his instructions on our hearts and not just on tablets of stone. And God promises to forgive us.

But the third promise, which is found at the end of verse 34 is, I think, the most amazing. God doesn't just promise to forgive the sins of the people; God promises to forget them, to remember them no more. Underline that incredible promise: I will remember them no more! That's the ultimate letting go. What an incredible God we have, a God who so longs for relationship with us that God willingly let's go of anything that might stand in the way of that relationship.

It's unbelievable, isn't it? I mean that literally. People struggle to believe that the God of all creation could be a God of that kind of love. We

struggle to let go of the image of any angry God who is still keeping score. But that's why God came to us in Jesus. Jesus didn't die to change God's mind about us; Jesus died to change our minds about God.

In Jesus God is saying, "This is how far I will go to show you how much I love you." The Gospel of Luke tells us. <sup>19</sup> *Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."* <sup>20</sup> *And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. (Luk 22:19-20 NRS)*

That's why, at the Last Supper, Jesus picks up the cup of wine and says, "This is the new covenant in my blood shed for you." To quote one of my favorite theologians, "In Jesus' death and resurrection the whole test-passing, brownie-point-earning rigmarole of the human race has been canceled for lack of interest on God's part." God isn't keeping score.

God has let it all go for the sake of love and relationship. I don't know about you, but that kind of love shapes my heart to want to love and obey God more. And I can't help but think that that is exactly what God had in mind. So, what do we do with this good news? How do we live into this life with a God who let's go and so freely loves us? I think perhaps that's best done by following God's example and learning to let go.

So, dwell with this question, "What do I need to let go of?" What do you need to let go of for the sake of love? Now let's put that into practice. I want to invite you to try something with me today. Lay your open hands, palms up, on your legs. Close your eyes.

Now bring to mind something you've said or something you've done that you wish that God would forgive and forget, something about which you feeling lingering guilt or shame. When you have something in mind I want you to imagine putting it in your left hand and then close your hand into a tight fist. Squeeze it tightly....

Now listen again to these words of promise from Jeremiah, "I love you. I forgive you. I have wiped the slate clean. I remember your sins no more." And as those words sink in, and as your heart embraces those promises, open your hand and let it go.

Now, with your eyes still closed, bring to mind something that's been done to you – an unkind word or an unloving action. Something that wounded your heart. Something you've worn smooth for turning it over and over in your heart and mind. Something that still hurts. Something that stands in the way of love and relationship. When you have something in mind, I want you to imagine putting it in your right hand and then close your hand into a tight fist. Squeeze it tightly. Now let's pray....