

Jeremiah 31:31-34
Lent 5; March 18 & 19, 2018

In the early hours of Friday, January 1, 1982 the seventeen-year-old Kevin Tunell made the biggest mistake of his life. At a New Year's party near Washington DC, he got very drunk; his friends urged him not to drive but he insisted, "*Nothing will ever happen to me.*" On the road, he lost control of the wheel, and smashed into another car, instantly killing eighteen-year-old Susan Herzog. After pleading guilty to involuntary manslaughter and drunk driving, Tunell was sentenced to three years of probation and one year of community service.

It appeared that Kevin had gotten off easy. But Susan's parents brought a civil suit against him. They settled the suit out of court for an amount of \$936, with a certain condition. Kevin would have to send them a check for \$1, made out to their daughter, every Friday for the next eighteen years – one for every year Susan had been alive.¹

At times, he failed to make the payment, even though it meant 30 days in jail. He said it hurt too much to write the check. He offered to pay more than \$936, if he could just pay it all at once. But her parents said, "No, we want him to remember." He even tried to give them 2 boxes of pre-printed checks that would have been 1 year longer than he was required because he couldn't handle the guilt. They wouldn't accept them.

I can't even imagine the pain that her parents went through as they grieved the loss of their daughter. But I also can't imagine what it must have been like for Kevin to relive that moment again and again every Friday for 18 years. Kevin needed forgiveness. For 18 years, forgiveness was something he would be reminded that he didn't have every Friday when it was time to mail the next check. He remembered his sin, but the thing he needed the most for that sin was to know that his sin was forgiven and forgotten. Can you imagine what it would be like to have your sins held up in front of you again and again and again? What a blessing it is to know, that even though there may be consequences for our sins, mistakes and weaknesses in this life, there is the promise of our God that says he will remember our sins no more.

God knew that the children of Israel needed to know that their sins were forgiven. 800 years before the prophet Jeremiah wrote the words of our text, God had brought the children of Israel out of Egypt in a miraculous way. He had delivered them from the hands of Pharaoh. He brought them to Mount Sinai and God made a simple agreement with them. If you obey me, I will bless you like crazy. **"Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."** (Ex. 19:5-6) God was going to give them more than they could even imagine. Like any good contract or agreement, there were two sides to this agreement. God had told them what he was going to do. But he also told them what he expected from them. *You shall have no other gods. You shall not misuse my name. You will remember the Sabbath day, etc.* How did they respond? **"We will do everything the Lord has said."** (Ex. 19:8) How long did that agreement last? While Moses is up on the mountain, they are building a golden calf below.

For 800 years, God said to Israel: *I take you to be my people.* And Israel said: *We take you, Lord, to be our God.* Almost sounds like a marriage vow. That's how God describes it in our text: **"they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them."** Again and again, they cheated on God. For every time he said, "*You shall,*" their actions said, "*We will not!*" For every time God said, "*You shall not,*" their actions spoke, "*Just try to stop us!*" In a downward spiral, Israel became more and more unfaithful to God. God went above and beyond the agreement that he had made with them. He would send prophets again and again to remind them. But the people wouldn't listen. So, finally after 800 years of patience and pleading, the faithful husband had enough. The marriage was broken beyond repair. Now God was about to walk away from them and send them into captivity in Babylon. For 70 years, they would be reminded every day, "*I sinned.*" They didn't need freedom or prosperity again, they needed forgiveness. They needed their sin to be forgiven and forgotten.

We look at them and ask the question: *how could they do that? How could they be so unfaithful to God?* Before we answer that question, what happens when we ask it of ourselves? We break those same commandments that were meant for us, as well. We may not have worshiped a golden calf, but do we put other things above our God at times? Do

¹ thecripplegate.com (May 20, 2013)

we sometimes hold those grudges that we have against someone else, and we just won't let it go? How many times do husbands and wives fight and keep bringing up the past? We are just as guilty as they were.

The first covenant that God made wasn't working. So, he changed it. **"This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time... I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."** You know how crazy these words sound? They are not words that you would expect from a perfect God. God changes the rules. He no longer says: *if you do this, I'll do this*. God doesn't just forgive. He chooses not to remember. He erases the board. There are no strings attached this time. No conditions. He keeps no record of wrongs. He says: **"I will remember their sins no more."** Done. Period. And when God makes a promise, he always makes good on it.

This promise goes against every fiber of our being. I can understand a two-sided agreement. I get: *If you do, then I do...* God says that this two-sided covenant isn't working. You can't keep your side. So, God says that it is no longer about me or you, He says it is about me. I will do this. No more "ifs." These are maybe the best words that you can find in all the pages of the Bible: **"For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."** That's why Jesus died on the cross. Covenants are only as good as the people who agree to them, so God did it himself. He is the only one who could keep this promise perfectly. He made this covenant with himself.

He doesn't hold your sins out in front of you every week for 18 years. He doesn't keep crushing you with guilt. He doesn't keep a tally of all your sins. He keeps no record of wrongs. No conditions. He forgives them in Jesus. He remembers our sins no more. Amen.