

O God, You are our God! Daily we seek You, longing for You “as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.”¹ Be present with us now as we listen for Your Word. Teach us the truth of Your love, that we may know You and make You known. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

You can tell a lot about folks by how they decorate their workspace. Do they have family photos on the wall or glossy art posters? A magnificent framed diploma or a handful of sarcastic Dilbert cartoons? At my school, on a historian’s door is a somber portrait of Protestant Reformer John Calvin. Calvin is frowning at the door of the pastoral care colleague across the hall, which has a tattered cartoon with 3 fish swimming along in a line of predation: little, bigger, biggest. The little fish about to be gobbled up is thinking, “There is no justice.” The bigger fish, in a position to eat *and* be eaten, is thinking, “There’s *some* justice in the world.” The biggest fish swimming behind them, a monster predator, is thinking smugly, “The world is just.” It all depends on your perspective.

At my office door, I have a calligraphy quote from Saint Augustine: **Thou didst strike my heart with Thy word, and I loved Thee.**² It was a gift, and I cherish it; the quote sums up how I feel about Scripture and Christian vocation. I also have a New Yorker cartoon of a crime scene—chairs overturned, vase shattered, chalk outline on the floor. The victim had apparently been trying to read a book without the guidance of credentialed experts. As one homicide detective says grimly to the

other, “He read for two straight hours *without any training.*” I love that cartoon because it satirizes the high-pressure academic environment in which I work. Books are hard, sure, but they won’t *kill* you, so maybe Yale could get over itself just a little.... Also on my door are little flip-flop magnets and a little plastic palm tree—icons of my deep yearning for rest.

How about you? What photos or prints are on your walls? What do you display to remind yourself of who you are?

That chipped mug from your road trip with friends,
the frayed collar from the dog you loved so much when you were a kid,
the photo of a sunset last year that taught you about beauty and fragility?

Such things are icons. They represent what we love and remind us about that for which we hope. In a way, they *name* us. They tell us who we are.³

It’s vital to know who you are and *whose* you are.

You know who can teach us about that? Jeremiah.

The prophet Jeremiah knows who you are.⁴

Now, if you think that sounds kind of scary, you wouldn’t be wrong.

Jeremiah thunders at us from an ancient Judah on the brink of catastrophe. Jeremiah has been commissioned by God to do the holy work of tearing down and dismantling so that God’s beloved people will return to God with their whole heart.⁵ Sin, idolatry, cruelty to the poor: Jeremiah sees it all. He knows that people are

stubborn and rebellious.⁶ Jeremiah rails against the rich and callous, the treacherous who “catch human beings” like birds in a trap,⁷ those who are “greedy for unjust gain,”⁸ who’ve “acted shamefully ... yet [are] not ashamed.”⁹ Leveling blistering polemic at everything in sight, Jeremiah is one *raging storm of prophetic judgment!* It’s hard to hear. But when you open the newspaper or turn on the news, you have to admit it: Jeremiah knows who we are.

The good news is, Jeremiah also *loves*. He’s not famous for that, but it’s true.

He loves his God, and he loves his people.

“O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people!”¹⁰ Jeremiah laments, grief pouring from him at what we do to one another when we forget who we are.

Jeremiah sees who we are in every detail. That’s prophetic vision: a blinding searchlight that never turns off. Jeremiah *sees* that sin is engraved on the tablets of our hearts.¹¹ Yes. But he also sees that God our Creator has made us for God’s Self.¹² All of what this ferocious prophet says and does is to make us understand that **we are a covenant people.**¹³

“Covenant”: what does that mean? Not a contract, not an abstract set of rules—not for Jeremiah. It means true, bone-deep *fidelity in relationship*.

It means *living in love*.

Covenant means remembering whose we are. We are God’s beloved.

It's easy to be distracted—sure. A thousand times a day, our attention is drawn to anger and hate and division. A thousand times a day, we watch as fear organizes our social and political life, as greed and terror jockey to structure our global interventions. We watch our 24-hour news channels as they report trauma after trauma, each incident an attempt to overcome fear through violence.

That's not who we're called to be.

Now, it takes courage to live in love,

to remember *every day* that you belong to God,

to remember *a thousand times a day* that it is *God* who names you.

And so I want to encourage you, this morning.

Know that you are loved! *That's* at the core—*that's* what names you. You are loved so much deeper than your accomplishments and your mistakes!

You are loved

... deeper than the hurt you've caused

... deeper than what people like about you

... deeper than the addiction you hope folks don't notice

You are loved

... deeper than what you're good at

... deeper than what you're trying to hide

... deeper than your anger

... deeper even than your fear.

You are loved with a Love *written on your heart* by the One who made you,
inscribed on the deepest plane of who you are—

a love impossible to escape,¹⁴

sweeter than honey,¹⁵

stronger than death!¹⁶

The key— God help us! —is to *remember* that. To know whose we are.

To **come back to ourselves as God’s beloved**, and to see others with prophetic vision, as equally cherished by God.

So we gather around Scripture to remember. We might come to church for the fellowship, the liturgical mystery, the beautiful hymns. A hundred things could draw us here. But we stay for the Psalms and Job, for the Gospel of Luke and Paul’s Letter to the Romans. We stay for Jeremiah, who *roars* that we are loved with a Love

deeper than the skin by which we so often judge one another,

deeper than the nerves that cause such terrible pain when we are injured,

deeper than the muscles we flex to compensate for our fear!

We gather as the Body of Christ around the promise of a Love beyond words.

Trying our level best not to lose heart,¹⁷ we help each other remember,

praying, “Oh, how I love Your law!”¹⁸

praying about “salvation through faith in Jesus Christ,”¹⁹

praying, “Holy, holy, holy” as we reach out our hands
 for the Body broken, the Blood poured out
 that we might *remember whose we are!*

And so whatever it takes, a thousand times a day, remember:

you are loved!

It is written on your heart, and *nothing* can take that away from you.

Amen.

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Proper 24C

Jeremiah 31:27-34; Psalm 119:97-104; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8

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¹ Ps 63:1. The first clause in this verse, “You are our God,” articulates the covenantal truth that all will come to know heart-deep, with no further need of instruction; see Jer 31:34.

² Augustine, *Confessions*, X.6.8.

³ About fifteen years ago, friend and former YDS colleague Wesley D. Avram talked to me about this theme from William Sloane Coffin’s [2001 sermon](#) on Isa 43:1 (God says, “I have called you by name; you are mine”). For a long time afterwards, I kept a little sign on my desk, *Who names you?*, to stay mindful of the One to whom I answer.

⁴ “Jeremiah” here stands for the beautiful, frightening, complex book of Jeremiah, which had a long compositional history as different scribal groups worked with, and fought over, the legacy of the prophet. When I cite poetic oracles and prose passages—material from earlier and later in the book’s developmental history—as

“Jeremiah,” I intend it as a metonymic reference to the richness of Jeremianic and Deutero-Jeremianic traditions taken as a whole.

⁵ See Jer 3:10.

⁶ Jer 5:23; 6:28; &c.

⁷ Jer 5:26-27.

⁸ Jer 6:13, a charge Jeremiah lays against *all*, not just the elite and powerful: “from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain ... everyone deals falsely.”

⁹ Jer 6:15.

¹⁰ Jer 9:1.

¹¹ Jer 17:1.

¹² Echoing words from the opening of Augustine’s *Confessions* (I.1.1): “You stir us up to take delight in your praise, for you have made us for Yourself, and our heart is restless till it finds its rest in you.”

¹³ I do not say “we” lightly or with disregard for the unique status of Israel as God’s beloved people in the witness of Scripture. To read the book of Jeremiah as being about all believers—including Christians—I reach for the theological claim in Romans 11: Christians, a “wild” olive sprig, have been grafted late and only through the grace of God into the “cultivated” olive tree of God’s beloved covenant people.

¹⁴ See Psalm 139.

¹⁵ Ps 119:103.

¹⁶ Song of Songs 8:6, with the original equivalence of the Hebrew text (“strong as death”) bent toward the comparative (“stronger than death”) in view of Christ’s resurrection as triumph over death.

¹⁷ From our Gospel lesson this morning: Luke 18:1.

¹⁸ Ps 119:97.

¹⁹ 2 Tim 3:14.