

“Valuing Children”
Jeremiah 31:27-34

Henry Van Dyke, an American author, educator, and minister, once wrote this poem about time.

Time is
Too Slow for those who Wait,
Too Swift for those who Fear,
Too Long for those who Grieve,
Too Short for those who Rejoice;
But for those who Love,
Time is not.

I think there is great wisdom in this poem about time and life. Love is really what defines our existence and not our years and histories. Yet, this is one of those hard truths to get. It seems that we often put much more emphasis on things that do not last. What really counts in your life? Is it the job that you have or don't have? Is it the social status? Is it the economy of our country? Is it the next big entertainment or vacation piece you will get? Is it this or that? Love is what it is all about but most of our lives are spent on everything else but love.

This was the message of hope that the prophet Jeremiah was trying to give to the people of Israel at a very difficult time in their history. This chapter we read from is part of a section in the book of Jeremiah that is called the book of consolation. This was around the year 587 BCE when the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed and the people were taken into captivity into Babylon. Their whole faith was shaken. The temple was not just another place of worship. It was believed to be the dwelling place of the God of Israel. Their lives were turned upside down. Somehow the God of Israel did not seem to protect them from this awful disaster. Yet, in the midst of all of this pain, the prophet Jeremiah proclaimed hope. But his hope was not based on the rebuilding of the kingdom and the rebuilding of human power. The hope he presented to the people was based on God's continuous action of creating and redeeming humanity. God's covenant was going to be written on the people's hearts. They would know God's love and will not through the external teachings of the temple or the Scriptures. They were going to know this amazing love because God's love was going to be an essential part of who they were. Based on this vision of renewal and recreation, the coming days will negate the attitude, conveyed in the proverb of v. 29, that the children must pay for the sins of their mothers and fathers. Instead, the Lord will build and plant a community different from the one of the past with a new covenant. The past that Jeremiah was addressing was one that was filled with injustice, unfaithfulness, and idol worship.

The amazing thing to note is that this renewal is still continuing in our day. God is still working on us as human beings to help us access this deep knowledge of love that is imprinted on our hearts. But we must keep watch and be open to this knowledge. And this is not an easy task, especially in our day with all the distractions that surround us. The Franciscan priest and writer, Richard Rohr wrote in a recent article, “We are a circumference people, with little access to our natural center. We live on the boundaries of our own lives... confusing edges with essence, too quickly claiming the superficial as if it were substance... But boundaries and edges are not bad as much as they are passing, accidental, sometimes illusory, too often needy of defense and decoration. Our skin is not bad; it's just not our soul... This is how our contemporary culture seems to look at it: 1) Our culture no longer really values the inner journey, if it would be honest. 2) In fact, we actively avoid and fear it. 3) In most cases we no longer even have the tools to go inward because, 4) we are enamored and entrapped in the outer self in the private edges of our private lives... How do you find what is supposedly already

there? Why isn't it obvious? How do you awaken your spiritual Center? By thinking about it? By praying and meditating? By more silence and solitude? Yes, perhaps, but mostly by living -- and living consciously. The edges, when they are suffered and enjoyed and felt and listened to, lead us back to the Center where God is obvious."

One of the things that would mark a culture to be truly focused on the center/soul is how children are treated in that society. Children can help us connect with that place of the heart. I believe that they are the heart of a society. By looking at how our children are doing, we can see how connected we are to our hearts and to the covenant of God. How can we measure the success of a society? I believe it is through looking at how the vulnerable are treated. Do our children feel safe? Do they have their basic rights? We are celebrating Children's Sabbath today as a congregation because it is a call to value all children in church, community, country and world. It is an invitation to advocate for their rights. But at the heart of this call is a deep spiritual longing. It is not just a call for social action. It is a call to love and to do justice, especially in light of the current realities of children. According to the Children's Defense Fund, every day in America 4 children are killed by abuse or neglect, 5 children or teens commit suicide, 78 babies die before their first birthdays, 1,154 babies are born to teen mothers, 2,145 babies are born without health insurance, 2,467 high school students drop out, and 18,221 public school students are suspended. So the picture is not as bright as we would like it to be for our children. Somehow we seem helpless in the face of these challenges for our young people. More and more programs keep developing as responses, but the heart of the problem continues to plague our society.

In 2004 there was an important report that came out about children in our country called, "Hardwired to Connect." This was the result of the work of 33 scholars who gathered together because they noticed an alarming trend in our society. Our children are suffering. These are prominent neuroscientists, social scientists, doctors, therapists and other professionals who were scared by the trends and wanted to see if there is anything that we can do about this. According to these professionals, the crisis of American childhood is that 1 in 4 adolescents is at severe risk of not achieving their potential, 21% of our children suffer mental illness, and many of our children are not experiencing themselves as valid and this gets displayed through difficult behavior and disorders. The amazing discovery of the report is that the key to this problem is that as human beings children are hardwired to connect. Children are born to connect with others and with something greater than themselves. So, in order for children to thrive, they need relationships with others and with God. According to the report, what's causing this crisis of American childhood is a lack of connectedness, two kinds of connectedness — close connections to other people, and deep connections to moral and spiritual meaning. The observation of the report is that our social and spiritual connections in this country have become weak. The report goes on to claim that what would really help is *authoritative communities*. Authoritative communities are groups that live out the types of connectedness that our children increasingly lack. They are groups of people who are committed to one another over time and who model and pass on at least part of what it means to be a good person and live a good life. When I read this, of course I was thinking to myself that this is all about the value of church community and the value of faith. Yet, how often do we really believe that our relationships with young people and our sharing about our faith make such an incredible difference in their lives? This is certainly not the message we get from our culture. We are often tempted to believe that what our young people need is more money, more gadgets, more programs, and more entertainment. But the new covenant that God has written upon our human hearts is about creating more care and connections in our communities. It is about helping our young people see where we see and experience the divine. Our calling is to be the hands and heart of Christ to reach out to the children of our world and to see that they have the communities that support them. This is not only a national priority. It is a faith priority. It is one that helps us be truly living at the center of our being instead of the circumference. The circumference calls for more of the

outside things that don't help, but the heart, the center, calls us for what truly matters, for loving connections. This is the heart of our faith.

The story is told about two thieves who came to a church and wanted the pastor to give them all the treasures of the church. The pastor went out to get the treasures of the church. But to the thieves' surprise, the pastor did not come back with jewels or money. The pastor came back with the children and the members of the church, and said to the thieves: These are the true treasures of the church.

If the vision of Jeremiah of a new covenant is a promise for us today, may it help us live as people of the heart, as people who know that the true treasure in our lives is the love that we share with others, especially our children! Amen.