

Lent 5 B
Jeremiah 31:31-34
March 29, 2009

Sermon preached by Laura Merrill
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Notes not for publication

Today is a big day; we're calling it Joining Day. I'll be inviting people who want to join today to come forward at the end of this sermon time, but I want to say a couple of things about what's happening here, just so we're all on the same page. First is to say that it is not necessary to be an official member of the church to be an active member of the church community, a member of the family of faith. Obviously you can be here and participate in just about every way without putting your name on the roll; there are only a couple of positions that require you to be a member. Some of you are clearly part of the life of this church but for one reason or another have not taken the steps toward actually joining. And I want to say today that there is definitely room for that here. In fact, in our Methodist language we have a word for such folks; they are called "constituents," people for whom we bear pastoral responsibility. You can "belong" to this church without becoming a member.

That being said, some find themselves ready for a different relationship, a more official relationship, that of membership. The foundation of membership in the church lies in God's claim upon us. God loved us before we knew any better, before we were born, and when we baptize people in the faith, this is the love we stand upon. God's love for us is primary. Then we make promises in baptism; we say we'll reject evil and injustice and that we'll accept and live by the power of Christ in our lives. And finally in

becoming a member of the church, we claim this church as the place where we want to live out that claim.

Because we need each other. As much as we may be able to live pretty good, moral lives on our own, I believe it is impossible to fully live the Christian life without being connected to a community. I, by myself, cannot be the Body of Christ. The Body of Christ is by definition, a community. So when you come for membership, you say to the church, "I need you." And, no less important, the church says, "we need you too." And we say it out loud, in front of God and everybody, sort of like getting married. We state our intention to live together with a covenant, to stick with each other when it gets hard, to call out the best in one another.

But it's not just about us. We also commit to something bigger than ourselves, to participating in the coming of the kingdom of God. The church is supposed to be an outpost of that kingdom, a place where the reign of God's justice and mercy and reconciliation are made visible, where they take on flesh, or incarnation. And that's the significance of the vow the people becoming members today will take. "Will you faithfully participate in the ministries of the church by your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service and your witness?" These are ways for us to serve Christ, ways for us to let God work on us, ways for us to participate in the coming reign of God.

To pray: for the church, for the world and for ourselves, praying not just to talk, but to listen and draw strength. To be present: first, just to show up, if not for yourself, then for the sake of other people, who need us to be here when they come, who need us to be present to them when they bring their hearts and their lives and

wonder if God really does care. To offer our gifts: remembering that no matter how hard we've worked for it, whatever we have belongs to God first, and to use what we have accordingly, offering some of it back to God with gratitude, offering some to the poor nearby and around the world. To give in service: in part doing what the church needs done, but also doing what lights up our hearts, what engages our gifts, channels our passion, and expands our hearts. To offer our witness: to tell what we have seen and experienced, in our own way, our own words, showing what we believe by what we do and what we say.

The prophet Jeremiah foretells a day when the covenant God makes with us will no longer be something we break over and over, when it will no longer be something we have to teach and remind each other of. "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when 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." Whatever your relationship to the church, whatever list your name is on or not on, this is the goal of all of us—to come to know the law of love like we know our own heartbeat. This is the goal of the family of faith that is Wimberley UMC—to live as a community shaped by the boundaries of the kingdom of God, shaped by the outline of Christ's body. Hear the call of God to you this day, and the open invitation to become part of the family.