

What Do We Pass On?

October 19, 2025

Imagine there was a town, maybe even a small city, that for decades polluted their waterway. Generation after generation, the families lived along the banks, worked in the mills, fished the river, drank from it. But over time, the upstream factories dumped their waste, the fish died off, the water's color changed, and children's health was affected. One generation suffered, then the next, because the river's damage carried forward.

But then: a community movement began. Young people and elders together said: "We're going to clean the river, stop the dumping, plant new trees on the banks, and reclaim healthy life for our children's children." They changed the laws, funded the cleanup, changed the practices of industry, AND the habits of their families. Slowly the river turned clear again, life returned, and the children could drink the water safely. The sins of the parents were not passed down unchallenged; a new beginning was made possible.

It's a story about environmental restoration, sure. But it's also about breaking patterns — about deciding that harm doesn't have to keep flowing downstream forever.

That's what Jeremiah is talking about when he says, "No longer will they say, 'The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.'" The people of Israel were living in the wreckage of their ancestors' mistakes. Jerusalem had fallen. Families had been scattered. It must have felt like all they could do was bear the consequences of what had come before.

And right there — in the middle of that despair — God says something stunning: "The days are coming when I will make a new covenant... I will put my law within them; I will write it on their hearts."

It's not a new set of rules. It's a new way of being human — one where we stop passing along pain like an inheritance. Where the relationship with God is personal, direct, internal. Where we know in our bones what love and justice require.

Now, we come to today — to our own world, our own rivers.

This week brought news that we have been praying for for over two years: a ceasefire in Gaza. It's fragile, yes. It's imperfect, yes. But it's a pause in the violence. It's a moment to breathe, to hope, to imagine something different.

And our passage from Jeremiah today helps us name what that moment could mean. Because if this is to be anything more than a pause — if peace is ever to flow again — the world has to decide that harm doesn't have to keep running downstream. The generational trauma, the cycles of fear and retribution, the assumption that violence is the answer and is inevitable — those patterns must be broken.

But they won't be, if we only listen to voices that tell us what we want to hear.

That's where Paul's words to Timothy land.

He says, "The time is coming when people will not put up with sound teaching, but having itching ears, they'll accumulate teachers to suit their own desires."

In other words: we'll listen to what flatters us. To what keeps us comfortable. To what keeps the story simple and maintains my narrative.

We do this in big ways — with our politics, our media diets, our "us and them" narratives. But we also do it in small ways, in our personal lives. We tune out the voices that challenge us. We keep choosing the familiar patterns.

But the gospel doesn't flatter us. It tells us the truth — that peace doesn't come from winning; it comes from healing. That forgiveness is harder than revenge. That God's covenant isn't written in the sky; it's written on hearts — ours, theirs, everyone's.

That's the deep work between ceasefires.

So what do we do with all this? Maybe we start small. Maybe we let Jeremiah's vision take root in our own lives. We ask: Where am I still passing along pain? Maybe not through war, but through words. Through grudges. Through fear. Through the assumption that things can't change.

And maybe we take Paul's advice to heart: "Be steady. Endure suffering. Do the work." Not just the work of preaching or protesting, but the work of being awake and honest — the work of listening even when it's hard. The work of seeking out voices that are going to move us forward, rather than the ones that pat us on the back for being right.

We can pray for Gaza. We can advocate for peace. But we can also practice the new covenant right here — refusing to accept that brokenness has to keep flowing downstream. Refusing to hand along bitterness, despair, cynicism, or silence.

And friends, that's why what we're doing after worship today matters so much. When we host our Heifer Living Gift Market, it might look like a fun church fair — with chickens and reindeer and laughter. But it's also a powerful act of covenant.

Heifer's whole model is built on breaking cycles — cycles of poverty, hunger, and dependency. They don't just give food; they give animals that produce food, and training that builds self-reliance. Their model is that every family who receives a gift is to "pass it on," to share the first offspring, the first harvest, the first blessing, with another family in need.

It's Jeremiah's new covenant in action: instead of harm flowing downstream, be about sending hope. The law of love written on hearts becomes milk for a village, honey for a family, education for a child.

And it's also Paul's charge come to life: doing the work, in season and out of season, faithfully, patiently, steadily.

When we give through Heifer, we're not just sending money — we're joining in the healing. We're saying that the story can change. That peace can grow from the ground up, from person to person, from community to community, from generation to generation.

The prophet says, "They shall all know me, from the least to the greatest." That means peace can't just belong to the powerful. It has to be shared by everyone — the grieving mother, the scared child, the weary soldier, the hungry neighbor.

If the law of love is written on hearts, then every heart is part of the work.

So today, as we mark a ceasefire that is both a relief and a reminder, and as we prepare for our Living Gift Market, we pray not only for the fighting to stop, but for the planting to begin. For new roots of compassion. For the rebuilding of trust. For the courage to face truth even when our ears itch for comfort. We pray that generational trauma stops here.

Because this is the kind of peace God dreams of — not just an end to war, but a beginning of healing.

May we be a people who live that peace, in season and out of season. May the law of love be written not just on paper or treaty, but on our hearts. And may it flow like a clean river, again. Amen.

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Jeremiah 31:27-34, 2 Timothy 4:1-5
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