

A quick, little online search will tell you that Portland, Oregon, is ranked fifth city in the nation for the number of tattoo studios. There are, they estimate, about 12 studios for every 100,000 residents. And if I am not mistaken, about 90% of them are within a stone's throw of this neighborhood.

Okay that last statistic is totally mine, made-up. But the point is that you can not go far these days without passing a tattoo studio, and in fact one *could* throw a stone at one from here. The growing number of studios reflects a burgeoning interest and a growing sense of tattoos being mainstream.

Where it used to be that people would cover their tattoos for certain situations, that is no longer the case. And in fact, often times fashion is determined by what will give the tattoo its best showing.

This body art is here to stay. It has made a permanent impact on several generations of young - and not so young - adults. Tattoo art has become a way of expressing something deeply felt about oneself or a principle one wants to claim in the world. The tattoo is the vehicle for publicly sharing where one stands artistically, politically, socially. It's a way of getting the message out to the world without having to actually verbally state it over and over.

In the recent movie adaptation of *The Importance of Being Ernest*, Gwendolen falls deeply in love with a man who has told her his name is Ernest. (In actual fact, his name happens to be John.) Wanting to profess her love for this man in the most declarative way possible, she has the name Ernest tattooed on her backside. I won't go into great detail here, but suffice it to say, it becomes of the utmost importance to her that her true love's name indeed be Ernest. Leaving John in a bit of a muddle.

After seeing this movie, my husband, Tim, being the romantic that he can be, had us take a pact that on our 50th wedding anniversary (which fortunately is still almost 30 years away) we will have each other's names tattooed on our own backsides.

The ongoing debate right now is whether we tattoo the name we most commonly use for the person - i.e. Tim - or the full given name - which for me would mean 4 additional letters imprinted. (Personally, I think Tim is just sore that he happened to marry an Elizabeth!)

In any case, this seemed to me to be a safe agreement to make with Tim, given that by the time we've been married for 50 years Tim might not have the memory to recall this silliness. But even more to the point, I can pretty well be assured that after 50 years of marriage I won't be sporting a name that turns out to be a passing fancy.

Because the reality is, I can't help but wonder sometimes when people choose to display a particular conviction through tattooing, whether perhaps down the road their minds or hearts change. And then what do they do?

At that point, they have to face the difficult question of what to do with this *former* belief or passion that's emblazoned on their skin.

I'm just too cautious, I guess. I want to be sure that it will be something I can live with *for the rest of my life*.

When Jeremiah speaks to the Israelites about this new covenant from God, he speaks about it being written upon their hearts. In actual fact, the Hebrew word for written is more like etched. Think the 10 Teachings of last week being "written" on stone. That is what Jeremiah is pronouncing. This new covenant God proclaims will be carved into their hearts, permanently.

God is giving each Israelite a tattoo.

A couple of weeks ago, Diane handed out tattoos to the children and some of the adults. A mosquito with a red circle around it and a line cutting through. No more mosquitos. No more malaria.

I happen to know that Fran did an excellent job of adhering her tattoo right above her left hand. She did such a good job of it that it remained with her in pristine condition for well over a

week. In fact, I was with her when one individual thought she actually had a professional, permanent tattoo. And this little piece of body art offered Fran multiple opportunities to talk about the Imagine No Malaria campaign - with complete strangers. And certainly with folks who had no idea that malaria is ravaging the children of Africa.

So there Fran was in all her glory. Sharing the word about what people can do to prevent and cure malaria. What they can do to save lives. Would any of those conversations have happened without the tattoo? Most likely not.

Tattoos are powerful messengers. They get under your skin and into your lives.

And God says, this covenant will not be something you read about on a tablet or hear about from teachers. This new covenant will be tattooed on your hearts. It's going to get under your skin and take over your lives. Your heart is going to beat a new tattoo, a new rhythm, that matches the march of God's mercy and love. God is speaking to our hearts and saying that our hearts are going to be physically changed.

This covenant promises that our very nature, the manner in which we literally live, is marked by our Creator. Marked by God's law and promise that God is present in our lives. God pronounces through Jeremiah that we are physically imprinted as God's people.

Which of course begs the question. Really?

Do we really live in such a manner that supports this bold promise that Jeremiah makes?

Can we point to the way in which God's tattoo is marking our lives so that the whole world can see to whom we belong and for what we stand?

Well, yes. And no.

It seems that one piece these stories of covenant that we've been hearing this Lent, raise with us again and again, is to ask how it is our lives are changed by being participants in covenant.

We receive the goodness offered by each of these promises - the relationship with our Creator who seeks wholeness and fulfillment for each of us. And yet we also can recognize time and again, the ways in which these covenants - while fully proclaimed - are not fully realized.

It's like we have the tattoos printed on our backsides rather than out where everyone might see them on a regular basis. We are unsure of how boldly we want to proclaim this truth of God's claim over us. We are even unsure how much claim God actually has over our lives.

That seems to me to be expected. Certainly, the Israelites were not suddenly transformed into new people who no longer needed teaching or reminding of the law. They continued to struggle and to miss the mark of God's calling upon them.

But that never negated the reality that it was also true that they were made different by God's act of consolation. As their temple was razed and their people scattered to the diaspora of Babylonian exile, they also knew the truth that even in such hardship God was present to the core of their beings.

This week I sat in a literacy group in Anna's class and our conversation about the Revolutionary War led us to talk about children in wars around the world, even today.

Then there's also the questions we have all been pointing to during our gorgeous but dry spring - questions asking what untold environmental issues we have to face - global warming and the loss of ice pack around the globe.

Or there's the latest employment statistics that show that unemployment is down, but so are wages. Meaning that companies are not turning around as many profits into increased wages, but simply using the opportunity to hire more workers at subsistence pay.

You have your own list. Powerful in all its detail.

That list is why this covenant is so important for us today.

We carry God's tattoo on our hearts. *And that makes a difference.* Maybe not every day, every moment. But allowing God to shape our hearts means that the way we see the world shifts. The

questions we ask of ourselves and our neighbors change. The manner in which we understand what we deserve and what we owe alters.

And then, when that tattoo gets shifted around so that more of the world can see it, well then we can't help but know that how we proclaim our faith has impact.

It's like what Kabir describes when love holds the scales - all form of measurement disappears. Because we so much become made in God's love, that measuring between right and wrong, who deserves and who doesn't, has no meaning.

“But this covenant that I will make . . . 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.”

Next week we begin our journey toward the cross. We have been making it all Lent long. But next week, we turn to face it directly. And as we consider the import of such a bold act of relationship with us, may we be compelled to remember God's tattoo upon our hearts.

May we let the love of God shape that covenant, let it get under our skin, change our lives, and change the world.

Amen.