Jeremiah 31:31-34:
“Can’t we all just get along?”
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“Can’t we all just get along?” I wonder how many times you’ve heard that familiar phrase during your life.

As children, we heard this repeatedly. We were expected to get along with our classmates, even if they stole our lunch money. We were expected—after a crushing athletic defeat—to look our opponents in the eyes and shake their sweaty hands because that was good sportsmanship. We were also expected to get along with our brothers and sisters. But you all know how that goes.

“Can’t we all just get along?” As adults, we all know this is rubbish! The reality is we don’t get along with everyone. We can fake it, but at the end of the day, there are some people who we struggle with.

Yet all around us, our culture makes us feel guilty for not having perfect relationships with everyone. The media’s idea of a picture perfect family is about as ridiculous as pigs flying. But the truth is our lives are full of chaos. Our relationships are held together by a thread. There is something about the human condition that makes it impossible to like everyone we meet. And despite what the media says, most of us are just fine with this.

*But is God just fine with this? Does it please God that we’re still struggling to get along with everyone?*

We don’t have to look deep into the Bible to find stories about chaos and broken relationships. After discovering that the Israelites decided to worship a golden calf, it was a miracle that Moses *only* smashed the tablets and burned the calf out of frustration. Saul’s jealousy of David—that led to several attempts to murder David. The Bible is full of broken relationships, one after the other.

Which brings us to our passage from Jeremiah. Set during the gruesome Babylonian exile in 587 BCE, the people of Judah and Israel were forced from their homes and scattered across the Near East in a state of diaspora from Egypt to Babylon. Families were broken apart, they lost their homes, and had no sense of security.

The people of Judah and Israel lacked political and social independence, and economic stability. Because the temple was destroyed after the destruction of Jerusalem, they no longer had a place to worship together. This war shattered community exemplifies the pinnacle of chaos, disaster, and broken relationships in the Old Testament. *But where was God in the midst of this tragic situation?*

Well, God was busy finding a prophet. It was during this time of great uncertainty that a young boy named Jeremiah was called by God to prophesy. Just like Moses, Jeremiah protested God’s call. But the people of Israel and Judah needed a prophet more than ever. And they needed God more than ever. Their survival was at stake and their lives unbearable. Jeremiah knew he was called to bring signs of hope for the future.

By the time Jeremiah was called, God longed for a relationship with the people. God’s people made egregious choices that broke their relationship with God. The chaotic world they lived in was not arbitrary, but part of their moral failure and breach of the earlier Sinai covenant.

But their suffering was not a consequence of their actions. It was a sign of faithful service to God. They were now ready to receive God’s new covenant. This covenant was God’s way of extending an olive branch to God’s people.
Jeremiah proclaimed that “the days are surely coming.” This was the first sign of hope of a new exodus where suffering would finally end. The Lord made a new covenant based on internal renewal and forgiveness, with the affirmation that they would survive and eventually thrive. This news would have been a relief to those who were suffering.

Jeremiah proclaimed that “this will not be like the covenant that [God] made with their ancestors.” But how is this different from the old covenant? When God made the old covenant with the Israelites, God hoped everyone would get along. But as the story goes, there was drama in the wilderness. The twelve tribes were formed because they couldn’t figure out how to function as one unified group.

The expectations God set forth for Torah obedience was supposed to unify them, but these expectations were too high for humanity. They were externally motivated, with the threat of punishment always looming. It’s no wonder multiple covenants were broken before Jeremiah’s time. The people couldn’t get along with God!

This relationship needed a new and improved covenant. God’s new covenant was everlasting because the law was now written on their hearts.

Jeremiah’s understanding of the heart was not referring to a beating heart, like the one in your body, but a person’s inner mind. The law could now be comprehended by humanity. Their relationship with God was now internally motivated and could never be broken. Instead of fearing God’s punishment, they were now individually motivated to seek God out for themselves.

But God was not finished. Perhaps the biggest sign of hope was that God offered forgiveness to the very people that broke the covenant. God extended this forgiveness from “the least of them to the greatest,” promising to “remember their sin no more.” God is not holding a grudge, even after they failed to be faithful. God promised to be with everyone in times of suffering and joy until the end.

Friends, this is the good news. God doesn’t give up on us when we struggle. God continues to try to repair our relationship over and over again, just like God initiated the new covenant with the ancient people.

God is the ultimate bridge builder in our lives. And now it’s our turn to build bridges with those around us. As the church, we’re called to build relationships with those who need God’s love more than ever.

But how can the church build bridges if our membership is in decline? I’m sure many of you wonder about the future of the church. With worship attendance dropping and many people spending Sunday morning elsewhere, you should be worried. But what gives me great hope are churches like this one because you keep building bridges.

Bon Air Presbyterian Church has a history of building bridges within the community. Just for fun, I’ll name a few.

This church not only made a significant investment in RISC last year, but the large turnout at the Nehemiah Action didn’t go unnoticed. Your strong presence at this event every year is a commitment to making sure that everyone in our community is cared for.

The Chef’s Club has spent almost 25 years providing delicious meals not only to our church family, but to members of the outside community. Wednesday night dinners bring all sorts of people together around a table, just like Jesus did. And for some of these people, this is the only meal during the week when they’re not eating alone.
Pastoral care is not just for the pastors, but something each one of you embodies. When someone needs help in our community, whether it be a homebound member or the youth at the Bon Air Correctional Facility, you band together to make sure they’re not forgotten.

The music ministry is not just for worship services, but it builds bridges every month within our community during the Second Sunday Concert Series. People from near and far join us to share and enjoy God’s gift of music.

Each week, the worship services—the preaching, the music, the liturgy—they all embody the gospel and challenge us to consider how we as the church can care for our neighbors in new ways.

But perhaps the biggest bridge you’re about to build is with the renovation project this summer. This is not about making the church look nice. It’s about making this a safe, hospitable place for our congregation and for our guests.

Your faithful decision to take care of this facility is building a bridge with future generations, who will sit in this very same sanctuary, who will sing some of these same hymns, who will worship the same God, and who will give thanks to all the faithful saints who came before them. This is truly a blessing.

My hope for this church in the future is that we continue to take risks, and find new ways to serve the community outside of these church walls. It’s great that this church has a long history of building bridges, but it’s not enough. In fact, it’s just the start.

The reality is our work is not over with. Unless we’re willing to take risks, build new bridges, and form lasting relationships with our neighbors, the church will continue to struggle.

So instead of asking that familiar question, “Can’t we all just get along?” maybe we should be asking,

“God, what can we do to get along with our neighbors, to get along with those who have hurt us, to get along with those who need your love? God, what can we do?”

Each time we build a bridge, we bring hope for the future of the church.

Friends, building bridges is not just God’s work, but it’s also our work. We are called to be in relationship with God and with each other, never giving up when times get tough and always finding ways to share God’s love, now and forever.

May it be so. Amen.