

The Healing of the Heart
Ezekiel 36:24-26; Matthew 5:8; Ephesians 1:15-18

Today we close our summer Season of Grace with its theme of healing, physical, mental, spiritual healing, the healing of relationships and society. Today, the deepest and most crucial healing, the healing of the heart.

In the Hebrew scripture the heart was far more than the seat of our emotions, it involved the whole of us, mind, heart, will and more. It stood for the whole of us, our “inmost being” as scripture calls it, our real self in whatever condition it finds itself in. Carl Jung, one of the founders of psychoanalysis wrote:

The utterances of the heart—unlike those of the...intellect—always relate to the whole.

If the Psalms are, as John Calvin put it, “The anatomy of all parts of the soul”, they are also the anatomy of all conditions of the heart. “From the depths I cry out to thee”, says the Psalmist, the depths of despair and fear and meaninglessness. From guilt and the sin-sick heart King David cried out, “Create in me a clean heart and renew a right spirit within me.”

In an old comic strip *Berry's World*, Santa is at the icy pole. He says, “I return home after talking to boys and girls all over the world—and what do I find?”

My house has disappeared,...I can't find Mrs. Claus...or the elves...or...."A penguin is looking at him and says, "You're at the Wrong Pole, man!"

Sometimes our hearts are at the wrong pole.

The prophet Ezekiel said to God's people those words from God: "Go get yourself a new heart", but only after God had already promised "I will give you a new heart and a new spirit."

This is *heart-work* we're talking about, God's and ours.

I

What are the conditions of our hearts that need healing today? People can die of a broken heart, a heart devastated by the loss of someone they love. Tony Bennett sang, "I Left My Heart in San Francisco", and our hearts have sung along about our own cities of longing and loss.

Our hearts can be broken in all kinds of ways: loss of a dream, of a profession, of what you wanted in life. As the character in *The Last Convertible* says: "Life is completely fair. It breaks everybody's hearts."

God comes to heal our broken hearts, but they are different now. They are like restored bowls and vessels in the Japanese art of kintsugi, where the broken pieces of a vessel are glued back together with golden gleaming seams.

What saved King David, in all his prodigious strengths and weaknesses, his pride and his sin, was that he had, as described by scriptures, “a heart after God’s own heart!” His heart was still pliable to the movement of God’s spirit. His wayward heart could return to God.

Jeremiah said, “the heart is deceitful about all things”, and he was talking about the passions and desires of the heart. They are not always trustworthy and can betray us. Sometimes they are in synch with God’s passions and desires, sometimes not.

An oft spoken slogan of today is “trust you heart”, or “trust your gut.” Sometimes this is good advice, other times not. So a daily examination of the heart is important.

St. Francis prayed, “Give me a transformed and undefended heart.” Our over-defended hearts can barricade us from God and others, from truth and from our inmost being. So we pray to be able to pray with an undefended heart, a heart now open to God, fortifications down. Prayer’s purpose is the opening of the heart.

In his most enduring work, “Confessions”, St. Augustine whispered, “Our shared bedroom, my heart”, and he was talking about his relationship with God,

not a lover. “Our hearts are restless until they find rest in you”, he wrote to God. And the Latin word for restless was “inquietus,” the unquiet heart.

Does that phrase “the unquiet heart” describe our hearts? Somedays our hearts are like Grand Central Station at rush hour. How noisy our hearts can be! God comes to quiet our hearts and give us rest. “Like a child comforted at its mother’s breast”, the Psalmist says, “I am calmed and quieted”, picturing God as a nursing mother (Psalm 131). The most beloved benediction in the Bible, Aaron’s benediction, ends with the words, “*and give you peace.*” We need this every Sunday as we leave.

II

“Blessed are the pure of heart”, Jesus said. Picture the heart as a clear vase of water. It is uncontaminated by other elements, clear and pure. Soren Kierkegaard said “Purity of heart is willing one thing”, not two, or three, or a hundred. What Christ offers is a singleness of heart. Don’t we long for this?

In the Egyptian Gospel of Mary (Magdalene), Mary says to Jesus’ male disciples: Jesus is saying to you, “Do not make two hearts”, and added “that we may be of one heart.”

Peter Palmer, Quaker spiritual writer says that we live with divided lives—for example with the difference of the public self and the private self—but offers the hope that we can be “divided no more”.

“Blessed are the pure in heart”, Jesus said, “for they shall see God.” The uncluttered heart helps us see. The cluttered heart creates spiritual cataracts that blur our vision, the pure heart gives us a clearer vision.

III

What about the “hardness of heart” the Bible speaks about? A heart hardened to God and to their neighbor, like Pharoah’s heart, hardened against the suffering of Egypt’s Hebrew slaves and against God’s desire to set them free. “Let my people go”, said Moses to him. And the Pharoah said, “No, no, no!”

Life can harden our hearts; we’ve suffered too many blows to our well-being. Buddhist nun and spiritual teacher Pema Chodron writes of herself as a young girl going down the sidewalk kicking anything she could find, rocks, cans, twigs. A woman watching her from her porch said, “Honey, don’t you go letting life make you hard.” What can heal our bruised hearts, our wounded hearts? Only love can do that, God’s love and the love of others, sometimes coming as a complete surprise, the surprise of grace.

Our heart can become cold as ice. As someone said, “Hell is not fire, it is ice.” What can melt our icy hearts? The coming of love, and the acceptance of love. Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote these lines of a sonnet:

Love is not all: it is not meat nor drink
Nor slumber, nor a roof against the rain;
Nor yet a floating spar to men that sink
And rise and sink and rise and sink again;
Love can not fill the thickened lung with breath,
Nor clean the blood, nor set the fractured bone;
Yet many a man is made friends with death
Even as I speak, for lack of love alone. (Sonnet XXX)

Love heals. It is all around, if we let it in.

Sometimes our hearts can be hearts of stone, but God says through Ezekiel, “I will take your heart of stone, and give you a heart of flesh.”

George Herbert, the 17th century poet and parson of a small British church wrote these words, both poem and prayer:

You Lord, restore thine image, hear my call.
And though my heart can scarce to thee groan
Remember that thou didst write in stone.

Getting a new heart is like having the image of God in which you were made restored, as a craftsman restores an old masterpiece of art.

Paul in the beautiful prayer in Ephesians prays that the “eyes of our hearts be enlightened.” The scales fall from our eyes. Now we can see the world, others, ourselves anew. As the poet, e.e. cummings, exclaimed,

(now the ears of my ears awake, and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened.)

IV

How can we get a new heart, experience the healing of our hearts? By doing what we sing every communion: *walking with God*. Our feet, our hearts, falling in step with God.

There is this tempo in music called *tempo giusto*, meaning the right rhythm, the right tempo. Sometimes if you take piano lessons, the teacher will give you a metronome to practice with, a device that you can adjust to different tempos, say 70 or 85 or 100 beats a minute. It helps you play the piece by the tempo assigned by the composer at the top of the score.

Guess what the metronome setting for *tempo giusto*, the right tempo, is? Between 66 and 76 beats per minute, which is approximately the beat of the human heart.

God has made our hearts to beat with the rhythm of God's heart.

There is a right rhythm as we walk with God, a right rhythm of work and rest, the every seven days rhythm of worship that keeps our hearts tuned to God's, the daily rhythm of walking alongside God, listening, communing, slowing our lives to God's pace for us. Not racing, running, driving. Walking.

Our bodies are made for walking, so our souls. Walking with God, whether body or soul, heals our hearts. In Annie Dillard's Pulitzer Prize winning book, *Pilgrim At Tinker Creek*, she writes as a mystic in tune with God's creation. At the end she writes

...and my left foot says, "Glory",
and my right foot says "Amen",
in and out of Shadow Creek,
upstream and down, to the
twin silver trumpets of praise.

So we walk together, left foot singing "Praise", right foot singing "Amen" and find our hearts slowly or suddenly being healed. The healing of the heart helps us to live full-heartedly, with a whole heart, that we may live with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and love our God and neighbor as we have come to love ourselves.

