

Where Your Heart Is

Ezekiel 11:19-20 and Matthew 6:21

It feels like we are caught in a flood, doesn't it? I am not talking about the storm that is hurtling itself out to sea this morning, but about the one that has caught most of us unaware, knocking us off our feet, reeling and struggling to maintain our balance and our sense of what is real and right. We are feeling stunned, bruised, pummeled, carried along by something we didn't expect and can't control. Emotions are running high, behaviors are erratic. What can we cling to? What holds? It is not a comfortable or safe place to be when, to quote a line from a prayer, *confusion alters our vision and what we knew no longer exists*.

I have been caught in floods before. In my personal life, feeling that I would be swept away by grief, sadness, anger, disappointment. And I have been there in my ministry – serving churches caught in crises and traumatic situations, dealing with deep hurts, feeling betrayed, wondering if healing was possible. It is a most difficult and strenuous place to be. *Wrenching* is the word I use for it. *Wrenching*. Being pulled apart, un-moored. You have been there too. I know you have. You have been caught in floods before, and now here we are again. Flooded. But we have also seen rainbows appear after a rain, green shoots springing forth out of a snow bank, and just this week as I walked I noticed a purple petunia growing up out of an asphalt curbstone, a most inhospitable place if I ever saw one. We can survive and even thrive after a flood.

My role here this morning fits under the heading in the Order of Worship in your bulletin called *The Word of God*. Meaning I am here to read Scripture, God's word to us, and to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And the good news is that God is our refuge and our strength and we will survive as God's family and be family to each other. It says that throughout the whole story of salvation – from the ark and that watery deluge right up to today at First Congregational.

As a Presbyterian I was ordained to a Ministry of Word and Sacrament – *Word and Sacrament*. A powerful combination, graciously made available to us all. It is not my role or intention this morning to interpret or try to explain the decisions and processes which have brought us to where we are. Church leaders and others are working on designing opportunities and options for going forward. My job today as preacher and celebrant, is to call us to God as a *refuge and strength, a very present help in times of trouble*. To remind us what we can count on, and to offer the bread and the cup for your nourishment and fortification as you face the flood and the storm. Word and Sacrament. I am also here to be your pastor. My role, as always, but particularly now, is to care for your hearts. The state of your heart, and yours, and yours..... all your hearts.

In contemporary language and usage, we often think of the heart as a soft warm fuzzy place where feelings, positive or negative, come from – *heartfelt, heartbroken, heart sick, heart throb, heart of my heart* But the Biblical understanding of *heart* is much broader, much bigger than that. In the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian, the heart is the central and unifying organ of personal life. It is the source of everything about us - all physical, intellectual, emotional and will-power energy, and the place where we achieve contact with the divine. It is the seat of our emotions, yes, but not only that. It is where we meditate on the deepest things of life, and where we determine and will the direction of our moral life. A lot goes on in and comes out of our heart. To say *something comes from my heart* is the same as to say "I". To say *my heart is grieved* is to say *I am grieved*. To proclaim *my heart is beating with joy* is to proclaim *I am happy*. The heart is more than the sum of our capacities. It makes

a person out of us. The heart makes us human. It is concerned with who we are and where we are. My heart is me.

And what kind of heart does God yearn for us to have? In other words, what kind of human being does God want us to be? Scripture has many references about undesirable states of the heart, what God does not want – uncaring, hardened, disobedient hearts. But it has more to say about desirable states of the heart –pure, clean, tender, renewed. Listen to some verses from the prophet Ezekiel, one of the readings for today, for a strong word about what God wants most of all, and may the Spirit add a blessing to our hearing of it:

I will give them one heart,[a new heart], and put a new spirit within them.

I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh so that they may follow my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them. Then they shall be my people and I will be their God.

(11:19-20)

One heart, a new heart or an undivided heart as some versions have it, a heart of flesh, beating with life and spirit, tuned into God and God's ways, becoming part of a people.

And while we are into the lessons for the day, hear the teaching from Matthew's Gospel, reading in the 6th chapter, where Jesus has been talking about the uselessness of trusting in worldly goods, the futility of storing up wealth in objects that are subject to decay and loss through moths and rust. Jesus says:

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (6:21).

True, true. But I would like to turn that around and say:

Where your heart is, there will be your treasure.

Where your heart is, there will be where you invest, where you put your energy and your time, where you reveal your character as an individual.

So, where is your heart today? Would you try to imagine holding your heart in your hand and looking closely and fondly at it. How is it looking today? Or imagine trying to listen to it. What is it saying? I know this kind of imaging or fantasy play can feel a little awkward to some of us adults, but please, try, in silence, to see and hear your heart as it beats right now. Where is your heart? The state of your heart is shaping your life; it is deciding what you will think and do; it is saying who you are.

A courageous heart will go forth and engage with life despite confusion and fear. It will face this flood as it has others in its lifetime, acknowledge the difficulties that it presents, the winds that rock it and the tides that beat upon it, and be valiant in the face of distress. As the psalmist encourages us, *I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong and let your heart take courage. Wait for the Lord.* If your heart is looking courageous, stay strong in your faith and your commitments, and be part of surviving the storm and moving to higher ground.

A **fearful** heart will be hesitant and tend to hold back. And where will that get you and the rest of us? Rather, why not go for whatever the distant shore or the future may hold? It certainly can't be as it was before, but surely God has a plan that includes us, so why not be bold in your trust of the Lord and the best intentions of one another? God is our refuge in every storm.

A **heavy** heart? Ah yes, there is much sorrow in our midst, and it is most appropriate, for we are in a time of loss. When goodbyes outweigh hellos, and something snatches away our joy, then rightfully tears and sadness abound. Hearts do break. They do! But continued despair, and only despair, will make for a gloomy, un-lived life. Gloomy and un-lived - and that serves neither God nor neighbor nor this church. So be patient, kind to yourself and others, and wait for more light, and lightness of heart.

Look again, listen again. Is your heart **angry**? When the people and institutions that we love disappoint us and hurt us, then the anger is real. It flashes and flares, it lashes out, it can burn and harm; but it can also be channeled into constructive behavior and action. *Be angry but do not sin*, the Apostle Paul urges. We can choose what we will do with our anger, take responsibility for it, check out where it is coming from, inquire what it is trying to teach us, and ask where is God in all of this? Anger can be used as a means of healing rather than harming, as a means of uniting and not dividing. So I want to ask you this hard question - Is it possible to carry our anger and lay it at the foot of the cross, praying that every bit of it might be used in the service of love and transformed into the energy by which God makes all things new.* Is that possible? Be angry if that is where your heart is right now, but do not sin, and consider that both anger and forgiveness can be part of the work of love and justice and reconciliation.

And a **forgiving** heart will know the art of liberation, the art of being free of the constraints, the shackles, the chains, which hostility, rage, or revenge place on the abundant life that Jesus came to bring to us. *Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive....*You know the rest.

Perhaps your heart is being stretched with **compassion**. Beautiful, then you will need never to carry the burden of judgment. What a gift that is! To not have your heart hardened is a good thing.

And hopefully as you look and listen, and hold your heart open to God, you will feel and see and hear that one, new and undivided heart that God wants to have beating inside you, for God's sake, and yours, and ours. That **loving** heart that awakens the spirit of possibility and engagement with others.**

Now I am imagining that your heart is beating with a few or all of these feelings - at the same or different times. I know mine is. That's the confusion which floods us and alters our vision. A courageous heart, a fearful or a heavy heart, an angry heart, a compassionate and forgiving heart? All real and likely, respectable and true. But where your heart primarily is, where it beats the loudest, there your treasure will be. Your treasure - where you take your stand, put your effort into, give your time to, declare your self and values. And that you have a great deal of choice about. Where your heart is, there will you define your treasure, your self. That is how you will be seen and known.

How your heart matters. It matters a lot. It really does. For all of us, and (if it doesn't seem too grandiose), it matters for the kingdom.

Can you look in to your heart and see that God loves you? As you come to the table to be fed, hold your heart out to the Lord for whatever you need – courage, healing, openness, patience, forgiveness and the ability to forgive, trust....And may the meal of which we are to partake soften our hearts, and slowly, over time, little by little, fashion us into the one heart, the heart of Jesus, which survived the cross and affords refuge in all ravaging floods.

May it be so. Amen and amen.

Sermon preached by Susan Power Trucksess

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Insights and citations

* Sermon preached by the Rev. Paul Gilmore, First Presbyterian Church of

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** *To Bless the Space Between Us*, by John O'Donohue (New York; Doubleday, 2008).