

## **Hearts of Stone**

I John 3:17-18 and Matthew 15:16-17

March 14, 2021 Fourth Sunday of Lent *Journey of Stones #4*

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*But if anyone has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need, yet closes their heart, how does God's love abide in that person? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.*

*I John 3:17-18*

*Jesus replied, "Don't you know that anything that is swallowed works its way through the intestines and is finally goes out of the body? But what comes out of the mouth gets its start in the heart. It's from the heart that we spew evil arguments, murders, adulteries, ...thefts, lies,"*

*Matthew 15:16-17*

“Heart” is a venerable word in the Bible. The words of Jesus are translated into English from the Greek, although he probably spoke them in Aramaic and was conversant in Hebrew. Whatever the language, in both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament “heart” has meant the same thing. It means the center of a person’s life. Just as the heart is in the center of the chest, the spiritual sense of “heart” signifies the center of our souls. It’s where we give our devotion. It is the center of our intentions and reflects the truth about a person.

Jesus says in Luke 12:34 - *For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

In Matthew 22:34-38, Jesus is asked about the commandments.

*When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your **heart**, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.'* This is the greatest and first commandment.

The greatest commandment was known by everybody in Jesus’ day. The essence was - you shall love God. Love the Lord your God with all your human abilities: the heart at the center of your being, the soul at the center of your breath and your passion, the mind at the center of intellect and reason. Love God with everything you are.

In our passage from Matthew, Jesus confronted the religious leaders for being more concerned with rituals of washing and making their outsides clean while having a heart that was rigid and self-righteous and committed to keeping a system of privilege and power in place. A heart of stone.

Now we might be more committed to our own hand washing these days than ever because of CDC guidelines to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. But it is not to make us holy in the eyes of God. However for those Pharisees, they washed their hands and only ate certain foods

as a way to show God they were indeed holy and clean. And yet, Jesus questions what is in their hearts and what words and actions come from their hearts. That is what shows who you truly are – words and actions of love and compassion or words and actions of greed, self righteousness, religious or political power over others.

Let's look at another story about someone with a heart of stone. When Moses was trying to lead the ancient Israelites out of from Egypt, something kept happening. God sent the plagues. It looked like Pharaoh may let the enslaved people go. But then we read in Exodus - *But when Pharaoh saw that there was relief, he hardened his heart and would not listen to Moses and Aaron. (Exodus 7, 8, 9..)* It happened over and over. We all have a propensity toward having our own hearts hardened when challenged to change and let go.

**The word "heart" appears over a 1000 times in the Bible.** Marcus Borg's book, *The Heart of Christianity* talks about the heart as our spiritual center.

"Spirituality is thus for the hatching of the heart. Whatever helps to open our hearts to the reality of the sacred is what we should be engaged in. This awareness leads to an image of the Christian life very different from the one with which I grew up. The Christian life is not about pleasing God the finger-shaker and judge. It is not about believing now or being good now for the sake of heaven later. It is about entering a relationship in the present that begins to change everything now. Spirituality is about this process: the opening of the heart to God who is already here."

I think that is very helpful and important – the hatching of the heart. Here is another image. I think the parable about sower and seeds and soil in one sense is about whether we have open, receptive hearts or stony, closed hearts. The heart at its deepest level, can be turned toward God or away from God, open to God and thus other people or closed to God and others with no growth in the rocky soil.

The work before us is cracking open or hatching or kneading of our heart until it becomes receptive again.

When we live with closed hearts and hearts of stone, we live with a protective shell around us that needs to be broken open. It means letting go of hurts we have sustained over a lifetime; letting go of resentments and grievances; not holding on so tight to our ideologies that it diminishes a potential encounter with someone who holds different perspectives.

Last summer our congregation read and discussed a book by Celtic theologian John Phillip Newell entitled *The Rebirthing of God*. Here is what Newell says about our hearts.

*As the heart of divine utterance is the sound or vibration of love. The universe is an expression of love and everything in the universe is essentially a means to love. .... the light in the eyes of every creature – all these are a means to love. I am a means to love, as are you, your children, and your nation. Do we know that? Do we know that this is our sacred role in the world?*

*When we become aware of that what is deepest in the heart of the other is a resonance, a living vibration, of the Sacred – whether that be in a tree or another plant, a wild creature or another human being – we find ourselves wanting to say yes. We find that our heart is drawn toward the heart of the other. If we stay focused on the sacred center of the other, we will be drawn into.. a yes with God, the desire to live in union...with what is deepest in us to what is deepest in the other....*

*This yes has the power to change our lives. We are no longer confine the other into the fixed categories of race or gender, creed or sexual orientation. The other is set free to be a unique and living expression of the One. ...We not only reverence the true heart of the other but also bring the vibration of our own being into harmony with the sacred sounds of theirs.*

So being in being in harmony with the sacred sound and aware of what is deepest in the heart of the other takes daily practice.

Maybe we start where we are.

What are the moments I notice my heart is closed like stone? What situations?

What moments of sadness or righteous anger or exhaustion or fear?

Am I like a Pharisee unwilling or unable to see my own blind spots?

Am I convinced of my own rightness and truth?

Many are wrestling with realities of white privilege and systemic racism. Some in our congregation are currently reading the book *Caste*. Maybe it feels like our hearts are hardened to these deeper truths. Each of us is looking at our lives, our assumptions.

And yet, I have heard many of you say that over this past year as you have read books and discussed them or participated Black Lives Matter movement or discussed books, there are moments of feeling heart broken. Breaking open of our hearts. Those cracks let the light in. I want my heart to break open.

Anne Lamott has a great quote about this. – “Grace is what makes things work out against all odds. If it were too big, it might sweep away all the bits of knowledge and insight we're granted as we go along. If it were too big, it couldn't get through the almost invisible cracks and holes in our walls, in our stone hearts; it comes in tendrils.”

I wonder if we might see ways our hearts have been broken open during the past year. I feel brokenhearted about the death and suffering in our country and world. I don't want to be numb to it. We have been to Covid College and we take our lessons with us.

I noticed something new this past week. I have felt a new sense of hope and even joy as I hear from you that many have received vaccines. I have heard you say you got to watch a grandchild's soccer game or see a friend. We are going into the future cautiously, but I sense light coming in.

So I wonder what happens when someone asks, "What would make your heart sing? What might bring you joy in the next weeks and months?"

This is a question I had to consider when I applied for a Lilly Sabbatical Grant a few years ago. What makes your heart sing? If you had 3 months of time and significant funds and if you can think up your wildest dream that would make you feel fully alive and free, what would it be? It was an amazing task. I applied and I did get the grant. It was such an amazing and almost overwhelming gift of grace and joy. Really more than I could take in.

But I realized that joy is heart-song. Joy that comes from being fully alive, fully connected to Divine Love, fully at home in love. When we are fully at home in love, that feels like joy. When you feel the depth of being loved, when you love others from your depths, when you receive God's presence as love - your own life, a gift, not earned, but for you, this life, all its beauty and all its pain, unique and unequalled anywhere else on the planet, your one gift of a heart-singing life held in love - you taste joy.

Practice listening to your heart song and letting it out. Listen to each other's heart song.

There are biblical stories about people who had hardened hearts, hearts of stone. They thought they could hold on to their power, their holiness. But often their hearts reflected fear or hate or greed. So they kept washing their hands and watched what they ate.

Jesus was not afraid. He reminded us that all people are holy, beloved. It was not what he ate that mattered, but who was sitting at the table with him. He wanted people to open their hearts to a deeper, broader experience of love.

As you look at a rock today, think about ways you sometimes have a heart of stone. What have been the parts of your life you are unwilling to change? What are the attitudes or motivations that you have been unwilling to examine? Have you been unwilling to forgive or be forgiven?

Then imagine you have clay or Play Dough in your hand instead of a rock. What is it like to have a heart that can be shaped and molded by Divine love and grace? How might our words and actions flow from a heart that is open and malleable? Softer and flexible?

May you continue to discover what makes your heart sing and share that song with joy. Amen.