

March 17, 2024
“Wholeheartedly”
Jeremiah 31:31-34 / Psalm 119:9-16
Pastor Tim

Word on the street is that the word, heart, appears in the Bible somewhere between 600 and 1,000 times – depending on the translation.

In Hebrew, that's *levav*, or the shorter form, *lev*; in Greek, it's *kardia*. You will, of course, recognize that root.

The heart, of course, referring not to the central, blood-pumping, life-giving organ – without which we will die. But to what has been described as “the seat and center of human life, emotion, volitional will.”

As A. Craig Troxel notes, as understood in the Biblical context, “The heart is the governing center of a person. When used simply, it reflects the unity of our inner being, and when used comprehensively, it describes the complexity of our inner being – as composed of mind (what we know), desires (what we love), and will (what we choose).”

This heart goes way beyond simply feeling. Holistically speaking, without this heart we won't die, but we will not, CANNOT, live.

“Keep your heart with all vigilance,” instructs the proverb, “for from it flow the springs of life.” (Proverbs 4:23)

And what does it mean to keep your heart?

The prophet Jeremiah, from our reading this morning, describes the new covenant established between God and God's people: “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.”

And as we affirmed last Sunday, what is divine law in summary but to love God with ALL of your heart, with ALL of your soul and ALL of your strength. That is, with your whole being. And as Jesus amends, to “love your neighbor as yourself.”

The law that God has written on all our hearts is love, and so to keep our hearts is to protect the love that God has written on them from being reworded, edited down, distorted – or worse, erased. And so to allow such love to flow freely, both giving and receiving.

A healthy and fully functioning, life-giving heart, physically speaking, is all about blood flow. Circulating into and through the heart, and back out.

Spiritually and holistically speaking, it's all about love flow. And hearts that have such flow, the biblical witness reminds us, are PURE – without dilution, without anything to weaken.

Psalms 51:10, the verse of Ash Wednesday fame: “Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.”

Matthew 5:8, from Jesus's first sermon: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” Which is to say, they will see Love.

Hearts that have such flow are UNDIVIDED.

Psalms 86:11: “Teach me your way, O HOLY ONE, that I may walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart to revere your name.”

They are OPEN.

Revelation 3:20: “Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door,” that is, the door of your heart, “I will come in and eat with you, and you with me.”

They are SOFT. Pliable, not rigid. Flexible, able to stretch and grow.

As Dalia Mogahed suggests, “Better a broken heart than a hardened one.”

Ezekiel 36:26: “A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you, and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.”

And **Matthew 6:52**, after Jesus miraculously feeds the five thousand with only five loaves and two fish, so that “all ate and were filled,” the disciples did not – COULD not – understand what happened because “their hearts were hardened.”

They were not SOFT enough to trust and understand what love can do. They tried to understand with their minds alone, and not their hearts.

As William Sloane Coffin asserts, “Too many religious people make faith their aim. They think ‘the greatest of these’ is faith,” not love, “and faith defined as all but infallible doctrine. These are the dogmatic, divisive Christians, more concerned with freezing the doctrine than warming the heart.”

Warming the heart!

And as Sathya Sai Baba observes, “God does not live in structures of stone and brick. (God) lives in soft hearts warm with sympathy and fragrant with universal love.”

If all of that is at least some of what it means to “keep our hearts,” the Psalmist goes on to remind us that we have to remain vigilant in doing so.

Pure, undiluted, undivided, open, soft, pliable, flexible, WARM hearts do not come without our commitment to keeping them so. And to keep and guard our hearts, we have to risk, to RISK, fully engaging them – not hide them away in fear of hurt or pain. And not hide them away on the dusty shelves of rigid doctrine and right belief, or of personal salvation without collective justice and peace.

From our other reading this morning, Psalm 119: “With my WHOLE heart I seek you; do not let me stray from your commandments.” Or again, do not let me stray from the law of love written on my heart.

“Wherever you go,” wrote Confucius, “go with all your heart.”

To love, and so to live, as God desires and as Jesus taught is to love and live WHOLEHEARTEDLY. WHOLE – heartedly. With ALL your heart and with ALL your soul and with ALL your strength.

Again, it's about the love flow – giving and receiving. It's about love flowing and so growing within us. To love and live wholeheartedly, we have to stretch and keep stretching our hearts.

William Sloane Coffin again: “If indeed we love (God) with all our hearts, minds, and strength, we are going to have to STRETCH our hearts, OPEN our minds, and STRENGTHEN our souls ... God cannot lodge in a narrow mind. God cannot lodge in a small heart. To accommodate God, they must be palatial.”

PALATIAL!

“Keep your hearts with all vigilance,” but to do that requires us to keep stretching and growing our hearts – allowing them to be stretched and grown – so that they are big enough to accommodate God's love. For each other, and for ourselves.

And we cannot do that alone.

Alone, it is too easy, SO easy, for fear or guilt or cynicism or judgment or indifference or narcissism or all manner of heart-killers to creep in. To gradually – even suddenly – muddy, divide, close, harden and cool our hearts.

So we turn to God, the very source of love, for peace, for courage, for resilience in the ongoing work of loving and living wholeheartedly.

Psalm 46:1-3: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.”

Philippians 4:7: “And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

John 14:27: Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”

And we turn to each other. We need each other. We need community to practice love.

Proverbs 27:19: "Just as water reflects the face, so one human heart reflects another." We reflect divine love to each other, however imperfectly, and so enable love to grow within and between and among us.

Let me close with a prayer, ever so slightly adapted, from Terri Peterson:

*Covenant-making God,
you use every possible means to reach us,
breathing your Spirit in us,
calling us by name,
showing us symbols of your promise,
offering us a new way of life.*

*We confess that (when) our hearts are hardened.
We choose certainty over faith,
anxiety over courage,
independence over compassion.
We turn our eyes from our neighbors in need,
and from stories of despair,
and from pleas for peace,
and from anything that might bring tears to our eyes,
for we prefer our own comfort.
We get caught up in our own needs and desires,
and forget you have made us to be your people, together.*

*Engrave your word on our hard hearts again, O God.
Then break them open for what breaks yours,
that your word might sink in and become a part of us,
so we might truly live
as if you are our God and we are your people.
We pray in the name of the One
whose love breaks all bounds ... Amen.*

May it be so.