

“Heart Stories”

Jeremiah 31:31-34

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The Fifth Sunday in Lent

In my hospital chaplain days, I worked on a cardiac unit; I got to know some folks who came in with some regularity and, some of those, waiting for transplant. I know here (in the church), I talk a lot about the heart as a spiritual entity; in those days I got to learn a bit more about the physical aspects as well. Today it all came together.

Like running into a video interview with Dr. Kathy Magliato, a heart transplant surgeon; she was talking to Janet Choi from SoulPancake, which according to their website is “the world’s most recognized positive media and entertainment company [that] partners with brands to create smart, uplifting, shareable content to connect with the hearts and mind of the Optimistic Millennial.”

(So), in the interview, Magliato told the story of her calling into the self-described seventeen year long journey to specialize in heart transplant; she said someone grabbed her one day as an intern and brought her into the operating theater mid-surgery where another doctor needed her to hold the patient’s heart so he could put stitches in a wound. She said, “It’s these hands. I have really big hands, I can palm a basketball. And it was the perfect size hand to hold a human heart.” (As she was doing as the surgeon asked, she thought,) “... my gosh, I’m holding a heart. This is incredible.” And then she said, “... wham, this is it, this is what I want to do with the rest of my life.”

On my very first night shift as a chaplain at Rush Presbyterian St. Luke’s Hospital in Chicago, the chaplain assigned to being on duty with me as my trainer was assigned to a cardiac unit – so, through the evening and night, we visited a heart transplant patient who was days out of surgery as well as several who were waiting for a match. And then in the early morning hours, a heart became available. My trainer was invited to observe a transplant, something she’d always wanted to do and because I was there to take the pager, she was able to fulfill that dream. I decided right then and there that (wham) I did not want to do that and I still don’t but I know I talk a lot about the heart.

A heart surgeon’s experience is awesome to think about but what I think is more awesome is that we’ve all held hearts in our hands When a child asks if they are pretty or smart, we are holding their heart in our hands. When we disagree on an important issue with a spouse we are holding their heart in our hand; or a friend needs our help, needs someone to listen without judging, we are holding their heart in our hand. We know what we say can help another grow into fuller potential or alternatively, we can respond from our angst and our own wounds and leave a heart wounded or even more broken.

Magliato went on to connect these two realities by telling a story about Barney Clark, the first artificial transplant patient in the US; she said that the doctors spent a lot of time telling Barney’s wife about the whole medical and surgical process and after more than an hour her only question was “If you replace my husband’s heart with a machine, will he be able to love me?”

Being alive gives us the capacity to feel; we need the beating of the heart physically to be alive and to feel so it has become the metaphoric container of our emotional life. The truth is that Barney’s hearts, the defective human one and the mechanical one were in the surgeon’s hands but so was his wife’s heart. And this is true for

anyone whose loved one is undergoing surgery or treatment for illness. Our hearts and the hearts of those we love are being held by others – in good and healthy ways, we hope.

It was in seeing death that Magliato awakened to the connection between the physical and the spiritual as she recognized that, what she described as, the essence of the person left or was gone when the heart and breath stop. She used the word ‘soul’ to describe not only aliveness but that uniqueness of the person, and so she believes the soul resides in the heart.

Jeremiah referred to this essence/soul as God writing God’s self/mission and calling on the human heart. It is echoed in the Psalm and a part of ancient physiology and though we have more science, we still hold this same physiology. And the question for today – this fifth Sunday of Lent – is do we listen to our hearts, to the soul? Do we listen for God’s will daily, do we take seriously God’s presence within?

Because we know we listen to the news, to professional association reports and research, to the stock market analysts and financial advisors, the weather report, StarTribune or Pioneer Press, New York Times or the Wall Street Journal. We listen to Shakespeare or John Meacham. Who do you think speaks best/strongest right now for Christianity or the spiritual life, Calvin, Tillich, Rumi, the Dali Lama, Richard Rohr, Pope Francis? Reinhold Neibuhr is getting more than a bit of press. In poetry, I love Mary Oliver and David Whyte, I read them for their wisdom, vision and enlivening guidance. Some follow the work of M. Night Shyamalan or other film makers, others do not miss super hero movies and are sure to see everything Star Wars. Olivia Pope hooks my attention from time to time, there’s nothing like watching a show called Scandal to make one feel self-righteous unless it’s binge watching Dexter, Game of Thrones, Breaking Bad, or How to Get Away with Murder.

It’s not to judge the mind’s interests and diversions, but again to ask, do we listen even equally to the still, small voice? Or do we assume God doesn’t speak to us anymore? One of the realities of our time is that we are scattered; our hearts and minds are overwhelmed by sources, by information, by entertainment, by work, and by fear and anxiety.

In a decades old article titled “Conscience of a Monk” Thomas Merton wrote:

“If I love God, I’ve got to love [God] with my heart. I’ve got to have a heart, I’ve got to have it in my possession to give. One of the most difficult things in life today is to gain possession of one’s heart in order to be able to give it. We don’t have a heart to give. We have been deprived of these things, and the first step in the spiritual life is to get back what we have to give ...” (Thomas Merton quoted by Parker Palmer “In the Belly of a Paradox”).

What we are talking about is reserving time and practice each day for paying attention to God, for learning how to hear the voice or heartbeat of God so that God creates the rhythm of our days and in the end, has been the rhythm of our lives. We need to tend and listen with our souls because that is the difference between discernment and pros and cons list. Even as most spiritual practices have weakened or been lost since the Reformation, listening to the heart has gotten pretty short shrift since the Enlightenment. It has become an ailment of the post-modern era.

Being able to follow Jesus Christ by way of discernment, compassion, and holding one another’s hearts as response to God holding ours is dependent on living from the soul. The mystics talk about this often, that the soul is our guide and here in our time, most of us do not think about soul, much less tend to it and listen.

Awareness and practice of listening to the law written on our hearts is critical because most of the time we operate on auto-pilot. And as caring, intelligent, and creative, as we are, human beings and the human family while on auto-pilot tend to go astray. Life is always about choosing whether we live from that essence of who we are in God, the True Self as the mystics would say, or whether we are guided by that mix of poetry, habit, opinion, fiction or ‘faction’, snippets of scripture and our favorite movies and books. We wander.

This Jesus knew and said, “where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matt 6:21), which is to be reminded of some cynicism from the Older Testament as Cain said, ‘Am I my brother’s keeper’ or as we will soon hear Pilate say again, ‘What is truth’? These are all tied together by a lack of consciousness, a lack of attention toward the Holy One. How then can we who wander, hold and lead others to safety and faith?

Again from Thomas Merton, “[The one] who attempts to act and do for others or for the world without deepening [their] own self-understanding, freedom, integrity and capacity to love, will not have anything to give others. [That one] will communicate to them nothing but the contagion of [their] own ambitions, delusions about ends and means, doctrinaire prejudices and ideas. There is nothing more tragic in the modern world than the misuse of the power and action to which [they] are driven by their own Faustian misunderstandings and misapprehensions” (Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*).

So, right now, try to find your pulse at your wrist or your neck – not always easy or successful for me – or put your hand over your heart – this is very, very subtle but you can feel the heartbeat or put your focus on your breath. Everyone can find a way to do this – pulse, heart or breath. Put your awareness there for a few seconds - take a minute to be present to the heart in this way, be present to the life-force in your body. This is God’s will for life and abundance.

What we are experiencing, is the seat of the soul, the heart, pumping the breath of the Spirit into life around your body. That is how close God is; God can whisper in your ear, give impulse to your hands and feet, give you a deep conviction of justice and love in your gut – God can and is doing all of this awaiting our full attention, hoping for our growth and conversion to the true self that is there within, that is written on our hearts. Your life is one of God’s heart stories; and in that way, your life is a gospel story. Let your life be the good news of Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God. Amen.