



“Where is Your Heart?”

1 Samuel 16:4-13; Matthew 5:8

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Fifth Sunday in Lent

He had it all—or at least it seemed so. Tall and handsome, he was a natural leader and national hero. No one was surprised when he was the people’s choice to become king. God reluctantly went along with the people’s acclamation.

Saul was his name and he was the first king of Israel. Things went well at first, but as the people soon discovered, appearances often mask reality. What Saul appeared to be was quite different from who he really was.

From the start, corruption ate at the soul of King Saul. He was jealous, vindictive and consistently self-serving. He grasped at power and was willing to kill anyone, even his friends, to hold on to his throne. Saul seemed more interested in the perks and privileges of power than good governance or the welfare of the people he was called to serve.

Soon, Saul’s popularity plummeted and, like despots then and now, he became increasingly isolated and often acted irrationally, even bizarrely. He desperately clutched his power and struck out at perceived enemies and his own friends and family.

God regretted ever agreeing to the people’s choice for king and, finally, gave up on Saul. God sent Samuel the prophet to find and anoint the next king. This was certain to end badly, and a king in waiting seemed prudent.

Samuel sensed God leading him to Bethlehem, a small, rural and insignificant village near Jerusalem. God led Samuel to the house of Jesse, a farmer who had some impressive sons who might be potential kings.

Samuel invited Jesse and his sons to attend a ritual religious service sponsored by the village elders. After the service, Jesse presented his oldest son to the prophet. The young man, Eliab, was by all accounts an impressive candidate for the throne. Samuel agreed. “He looks good,” the prophet told Jesse. “I’m sorry, he’s not the one.”

Jesse presented his second son, Abinadab, another likely king in the making. He, too, was impressive. “He’s not the one either,” Samuel declared.

Jesse introduced a third son, Shammah. Again, the prophet said “no.” No doubt a bit frustrated, Jesse presented his fourth son, his fifth, then the sixth and finally, his seventh son. Each time the prophet sensed that these boys were not kingly material.

Samuel asked Jesse, “Do you have another son?”

“Well, yes,” Jesse replied, “but he’s just a boy. He’s taking care of the sheep outside town. I don’t think the boy has royal potential.”

“Bring him to me,” the prophet said. “I’m not moving until I see him.”

Reluctantly, Jesse sent for his youngest son. The boy appeared and after one look at him, Samuel knew he was the one. Wasting no time, Samuel anointed the boy king and the rest, as they say, is history. The boy's name was David, and he grew up to become the greatest king in Israel's history. In his spare time, he wrote hymns. Many are included in the biblical book, the Psalms. We recited one of them this morning.

I hope you noticed that tucked into the story is powerful sentence on which this story and much of human history hang. As Samuel was examining Jesse's sons, God said to his prophet, "Do not look at their height or outward appearance. The Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on outward appearance. God looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).

David was small, young and the least of Jesse's sons, but God knew David had the internal qualities necessary in a great leader. He had potential invisible to his own family—they sent him off to herd sheep while God was forming a great leader. Most of all, God knew that David had a great heart. Later in the story it says, "David was a man after God's own heart." That expansive heart created a king who is still called "The Shepherd of Israel." He was tough but tender, demanding but merciful, presidential but with a heart for his people.

It seems David learned statecraft from some good theology. The most famous of David's hymns says,

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want,
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
 he leads me beside still waters;
 he restores my soul....
Even though I walk through the valley of death,
 I fear no evil;
 for you are with me;
 your rod and your staff –
 they comfort me....
Surely goodness and mercy shall
 Follow me all the days of my life...

David committed himself to having a heart like God's heart, the heart of a good shepherd.

Life at its simplest and best is a matter of the heart. Faith, properly understood, is a matter of the heart. The story of the world and the subtext of Scripture is that we humans live and judge on outward appearance, while God is committed to and approves matters of the heart.

"Heart" is one of the most versatile metaphors in the English language. We say hearts break and they mend. We can have a heart of gold or a heart of stone. Our hearts droop with sadness but they also leap with joy. Our hearts can be on fire or be icy. Our hearts long for people and things and they also turn from and reject people and things.

The point of the famous children's story, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, is that the old Grinch was committed to his own misery, causing misery and stealing Christmas because he had a heart that was two sizes too small. We all understand the metaphor.

Most of all, the heart loves—or does not. Our heart is our inner self, the place we think, feel, decide and experience the world. It is the locus of moral and spiritual reasoning. Your heart is you.

Nothing in this world is larger or more significant than our heart. The shape of our hearts determines the course of our lives and the shape of our characters. Our hearts are a matter of life and death and a matter of eternity.

That is the story of the Bible from beginning to end. In the beginning of the story, the law of God begins and ends in the heart. Deuteronomy 6 makes it clear, in a sentence still quoted by pious Jews every day of the year, that we must love God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind. Biblical religion is a matter of the heart. Get the heart right, and all else falls in place. Miss the point and we lose our souls—and disfigure our lives.

The prophets correct the human tendency to make life and religion something other than a matter of the heart. Isaiah, speaking for God, says, “You honor me with your lips, but your hearts are far from me and in vain you worship me.” It is a consistent theme in Scripture. The book of Proverbs, a collection of Jewish wisdom, puts it this way: “Guard your heart with vigilance, because out of it spring all the issues of life” (Proverbs 4:23).

Jesus’ moral and spiritual revolution was all about restoring the human heart to its correct shape and end. He proclaimed that the kingdom of God, that is, God’s rule on earth, was present in his ministry. That kingdom, he proclaimed, “is in you.” God claims our hearts. It’s the first principle of the Bible and the Christian gospel.

The Sermon on the Mount, Jesus’ version of Christianity 101, is all about the correct shape of the human heart in the kingdom of God. Outward displays of religion without the heart are without meaning and counterproductive. What is in our hearts, Jesus taught, determines what comes out in our lives. “Out of the abundance of the heart comes either good or evil.” He also taught that what we love most indicates the content of our heart. When he taught his disciples that they must forgive one another, surely the most difficult part of Christian discipleship, he added, “from the heart.”

The Beatitudes, which describe essential Christian character, are all about the heart. God’s kingdom in us means we will have humble hearts (“blessed are the poor in spirit”), broken hearts (“blessed are those who mourn”), passionate hearts (“blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness”), merciful hearts (“blessed are the merciful”) and peaceful hearts (“blessed are the peacemakers”). And today’s gospel lesson, the fifth Beatitude, focuses on the heart: “Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.”

What God wants from us more than anything is our heart, our love, our friendship. To have a pure heart is to have an inner self that is sincere, transparent, and simple, without guile, duplicity or hypocrisy. Purity of heart means a relationship with God that is real and sincere. It means relationships with each other that are honest and have integrity. Being pure in heart means having our inner self and our external behavior in sync. It means being what we are.

If that is so, the Lenten question is simple but profound: Where is our heart? Where is our heart with God? Does God own our heart? Is God shaping our heart? Does the love of God move our heart?

Where is our heart with others? Is my heart open or closed, soft or hard, large or small, growing or shrinking, simple or cynical?

Joan Metcalf has the largest heart I’ve ever known. Joan was widowed young and left with three teenage girls. She raised her daughters wonderfully and along the way became a volunteer at our church. Her gift of love was so apparent that, although she had no theological or ministerial training, she became the Director of Pastoral Care.

Joan has the capacity to love several thousand people equally and with passion. She knew everyone’s name and was invested in everyone’s life. I still don’t know how she did it. Her signature goodbye was “love, love.” And you knew she meant it. She became a legend and irreplaceable. When she retired in her mid-seventies, it was an enormous loss to the congregation.

However, Joan held one part of her heart in reserve. Though she is a beautiful woman and had no shortage of suitors, she seldom dated, nor was she interested having a relationship. She thought men pursuing her was funny.

Everything changed when Joan was in her mid-seventies. Herb, a widower in the congregation, became part of her life. Friendship turned to love. One day Joan came into my office obviously flustered. She was blushing and short of breath.

“I’ve got to talk to you,” she said. “I feel like a teenage girl. Though you are twenty years younger than me, I need you to be my dad.” I became part of a wonderful story.

One day she said something I’ll never forget. “When Bill died, I built a wall around my heart. Herb is taking down that wall one brick at a time.” The consequence was a larger and more joyous heart.

Time and experiences make us all build walls around our hearts. Those walls protect us, keep us safe and create distance. Some of those walls keep us safe from God and God’s claim on us. Other parts of the wall keep us safe from each other.

I know. Park Street Church in Boston is a wealthy and influential congregation. We gave away about \$1 million a year. Lots of people came to see me. Some wanted money. Others wanted approval, quotes or favors. It seemed that nobody came to see me because they loved me. They wanted something. I became suspicious, even cynical. It was increasingly difficult to walk through life with open arms and an open heart. I built a wall around my heart. We all do.

The work of faith, the essential work of Lent, is to take down those walls, to re-form our hearts in the shape of God’s heart. Where is your heart? Does it belong to God? Are you open to your neighbor?

Walls don’t just disappear. They come down one brick at a time. The work of a congregation is, in part, tearing down walls between us and God, between us and each other. It is hard work, slow work, often scary work.

One brick at a time. Each hymn sung from the heart removes a brick. Every prayer offered from the heart, removes another brick. Lessons heard, sermons that connect, take a brick or two away. Conversations in the hallways, in fellowship hour, on the playground, when done in faith, take down a brick and build our hearts.

The work is never over because life has a way of replacing those bricks. But, thanks be to God, when we open our hearts to God and each other week after week and day after day, our hearts grow into a new and powerful shape that, in fact, knocks a few bricks down and make us what God intends us to be.

Amen.