

## **Open Heartedness, our saving grace**

(Reflection by Rev. Peggy McDonagh - May 17, 2020)

My friends, it feels so good to be together again this morning. What a delight it has been and continues to be, to share Sunday mornings with you together in the spirit, and so the spirit of love within me honors the spirit of love within you. It is through this spirit that we are connected even as we self-isolate.

Throughout this Easter season, we have been exploring the theme "Heart of the Matter." As we gather each Sunday, we recall that the life and death of Jesus had one strong message -- love one another. Time and again, we have heard Jesus offer the disciples a post-resurrection message of empowerment to give to the world what he had given to them —unconditional love. Throughout the series, we have been encouraged to live from the heart, and more importantly, to live from hearts full of love, because love is the heart of the matter.

The theme today, 'Kept in the Heart,' focuses on Jesus' final day with the disciples. On that day the disciples were distraught and fearful because they knew that Jesus was going to leave them. Their hearts were troubled because they were uncertain about what would become of them and what their future would be like without their teacher. Jesus encouraged them to keep their hearts open to his message, his spirit, and his commandment to love and to keep each other in love.

It seems to me that the disciples had a choice either to remain in their fear or hold tightly the assurances of Jesus and confidently face their future. Would they let their hearts be closed with fear and anxiety, or would they open their hearts to Jesus' way of love?

Within the cavity of the human chest is an amazing muscle about the size of one's fist. Its name is "the heart." Approximately every 8/10ths of a second, it is charged by a tiny electrical impulse, creating the heartbeat. This remarkable muscle beats about 100,000 times every day, pumping some 1,800 gallons of oxygen rich blood to all parts of the body. The Hebrew scripture describes it this way, "The heart with its precious cargo is the life-center of the human body."

The English word "heart" derives from words in the Hebrew Testament. The word 'leb' is rendered "heart" 599 times, and the kindred form 'lebab' is likewise found as "heart" 252 times. In the Greek Testament, the original word is kardia (cf. English, cardiac), mentioned 156 times.

In scripture, the word "heart" is almost always used figuratively. It represents a host of emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and moral qualities.

Spiritually speaking, the heart is considered the sanctuary of the divine, the seat and strength of life. The spiritual heart embodies the mind, soul, spirit, and one's entire emotional nature and understanding. It is a metaphor for the self at its deepest level. It beats our feelings, directs our insight, and guides our lives. The heart is life, the center of our existence that helps us to discern how to navigate our way through life.

The spiritual journey is an ongoing process of keeping the heart alive and open to the spirit of love that enables us to live healthy, meaningful, kind, honest, just, and trustworthy lives. Jesus' parables and teachings were his way of attempting to open the hearts of his disciples so that they could receive his message and grow in wisdom and understanding.

The last days of his life with his disciples, having spent three years together, culminates in the most significant decision they were to ever make. Would they keep their hearts shut with fear and unease, or will they open their hearts in faith and love? All Jesus can do is offer assurance; the rest is up to them.

Sensing their concern and fear, Jesus consoles them and assures them that he is not abandoning them. He will send an "Advocate," meaning a Helper," who will walk alongside them and teach them. This spirit will "remind" them of what he had taught, "to keep my commandments" - especially the new commandment to 'love one another as I have loved you.' Jesus says, "abide in me, as I abide in you; love me as I have loved you; come close to me and live in me in love, and you will, by virtue of that closeness, keep my commandments. Our connection through love comes first, and everything else - including 'keeping commandments' - flows from that love."

Will the disciples hear Jesus' assurances and trust him by opening their hearts? Or will their hearts remain closed? In scripture, a closed heart is described as a hard heart or a 'heart made of stone' and is considered a typical human condition. When the heart is in a closed state, it keeps anxiety, fear, and frustration locked tightly within the heart and eventually it negatively affects our decisions, actions, and words. There are many occasions in the gospel stories where the disciples demonstrated their hard-heartedness: they tell a blind person to stop bothering Jesus; they ignore women, they stop children from coming to Jesus, and they deny and desert him.

When our hearts are hard, we become cynical and hide in the darkness of our righteousness and indifference. Paul and Jesus talk about people being spiritually blind; people closed off and unaware. A hard heart affects the mind and hinders understanding and concern. A person with a

closed heart feels no gratitude and harbors bitterness and anger. A closed heart remains unmoved by oppression, exploitation, and injustice, and feels little concern for others.

It is entirely up to us if we are going to let life's experiences close or open our hearts, but it is only in the opening of our hearts that we will experience the fullness of life. Jesus knew that if the disciples followed his commandments and kept his love in their hearts, their hearts would open, and they would find the confidence to step out and be his voice, hands, and feet.

With open hearts, the disciples would free the divine inner presence, the helper, that spirit of wisdom to guide and empower them. This wisdom shows itself as insight, sometimes as a complete shift in perspective, and sometimes as a discovery of some aspect of life or the world we hadn't seen before. The spirit of wisdom gives us the courage to confront the life experiences that closed our hearts and address the reality of our losses, fears, regrets, and missed opportunities.

It is not easy to break open our hearts because we become vulnerable. When we open our hearts, it may stir in us intense pain because we begin to feel deeply and to see clearly. We will always face challenges and trials as we open our hearts because we confront our dysfunctions and work to reassess them when necessary. An open-heart embraces joys midst its sorrows; it listens well and discerns what needs to change and what must be accepted as unchangeable. An open heart alters our lives, often in life-transforming ways.

The disciples decided to open their hearts to Jesus' love and spirit. The 'Holy Spirit,' the spirit of wisdom, empowered them to expand a movement, a community, that did even "greater works" than Jesus did.

Like the disciples in that last week of their time with Jesus, when the CoVid virus infiltrated our lives, life as we knew it changed. In the first weeks of the pandemic, we faced the drastic and decisive way the virus ravaged the world, and our hearts filled with disbelief, confusion, and anxiety. As we confronted what felt and still feels like an impossible situation, we could not help but feel vulnerable, anxious, and uncertain. We can only speculate on the implications of this pandemic on our future life. Women, men, and children worldwide are impacted by it.

It has been difficult to acknowledge that people are dying regardless of the efforts made by governments and medical systems. We have had our eyes open to the fragility of all of our institutions and social structures. It is little wonder that many people feel vulnerable and powerless.

At the beginning of this journey, we all had to make decisions around how we were going to respond to this pandemic. Would we respond by closing our hearts in fear, desperation, and anxiety and not heeding guidelines? Would we respond by opening our hearts to love, hope, and determination, and help each other see our way through this? Would we let it transform us from within, in the depths of our heart, so that we might be renewed and awakened people willing to rewrite our future story?

It feels as if the heart of the world broke open as we began to hear about and bear witness to heart-warming tales of kindness. We have listened to stories of determination and sacrifices, and we have seen the dedication of frontline warriors. Every day there is evidence of how hearts are breaking open with love, kindness, empathy, and compassion. We know how closed hearts create injustice and violence but now we read about previously hard-hearted police officers, border guards, and others in conflict zones, showing their human faces and opening their hearts, as they express kindness and compassion to those who are oppressed and segregated.

All over the world, hearts are breaking open with gentleness, understanding, and concern replacing injustice, hatred, and viciousness. The coronavirus pandemic is showing us that a new way is possible, a new way of doing business, of treating others, of sharing, of caring, of reaching out, and of replacing hatred and anger. This pandemic invites us to transform our hard hearts and to let our open hearts guide and empower us into a new and transformative future.

It is an invitation to believe that God, the divine Heart of Life, can and is doing a new thing. And we hear Jesus' words of assurance to his disciples, I am with you always, through love I abide in you, and you in me. We listen and embrace Jesus' promise to accompany us as we assume our role as co-creators in this new setting until we come out of this situation with hope.

My friends, may all that we have experienced at this time, not be in vain. May all that we have seen, learned and discovered register in our hearts as a wake-up call. May the many continued struggles and deaths be ever in our awareness. Let us do what we can to reverse a society of exclusion, paving the way for a new community of loving encounters and global responsibility. May we remember that everything that happens to us has the potential to deepen us. We are discovering that each new experience births within us new territories of the heart. May we keep each other in our hearts. May unconditional love remain in our hearts, because love continues to be, more than ever, the Heart of the Matter. Amen.