

TEXT: Lectionary readings
THEME: You have been born anew
SUBJECT: The human heart
TITLE: The Pregnant Heart

Third Sunday of Easter
26 April 2020
Messiah Moravian
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The scripture readings for today take us on a tour of the human heart. The hearers of Peter's sermon (Acts 2:36-41) are "cut (stung, pierced) to the heart." Whichever translation you prefer, the experience remains one of sharp emotional pain. In Peter's letter (1 Peter 1:17-23), the souls of the readers are purified by obedience to the truth so that genuine mutual love arises from the depths of the heart.

In the Gospel reading (Luke 24:13-35), Jesus expresses exasperation at the disciples because they are "slow of heart." When Jesus finishes giving a remedial lesson they exclaim, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us?"

We begin our tour with the heart cut, stung, pierced. This is the heart awakened to its culpability for injuring the heart of another. The heart awake to the pain caused can either harden in self-justification, in blaming everyone and everything else for what has gone wrong, or it can break open, growing into greater capacity for the many forms of love.

Peter advises repentance, meaning a change of heart not a change of the past. The acts and thoughts that keep us bound to the past, that keep us alienated from God and from one another, are done, finished, closed. Their consequences remain.

What can be changed, says Martin Marty, is our attitude to the past as it effects the present. We get closer to repentance by asking, "What kind of person was I that I could do that!" The first step in forgiveness is recognizing that I am the kind of person who can do and has done bad things. Only the supple heart can hold suffering in a way that opens to new life.

Our tour of the human heart continues with Peter's admonition to his readers: "Now that you have purified your souls (lives) by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart" (1 Peter 1:22). What is the relationship between "obedience to the truth" and "genuine mutual love?" First, as Pope Benedict the XVI said, "Suppressed truths ultimately lead to a poisoning of the spirit."

Obedience. Somehow we have come to believe that any form of obedience compromises our freedom. Truth is, we obey something, if not the truth, then our impulses, fantasies, desires, prejudices. Doing what I want when I want doesn't make me free, it makes me a slave to my passions. As Jesus famously reminded us, knowing the truth, doing the truth, is what sets us free.

I suspect our allergy to obedience has something to do with the desire to escape truth's claim upon our lives. In each of our lives, ignorance or prejudice or greed darkens our vision of the truth.

Our vision of the truth improves in a community where we both know and are known in genuine love. Genuine love is the only basis for seeing the truth.

For early Christians it is a fundamental theological conviction that reality itself is grounded in God, whose being is love. To be made in the image of God means that we cannot see anyone or anything else as it truly is without seeing as God sees, that is, through the lens of love. Only the presence of real love could be the basis of seeing truth at all.

The relationship between truth and love is reciprocal: the deeper the love the clearer the vision of the truth, the clearer the vision of truth the larger the love. On and on it goes. Peter encourages us to love one another deeply from the heart, to see and to know one another as more than an extension of our own needs, desires, or fantasies.

Our tour of the human heart continues with Jesus, the great teacher of love, calling his students slow of heart. I have great sympathy for these students. Their slowness of heart has to do with reluctance to see their beloved teacher suffer. We want to spare those we love from suffering. The highest goal of Western societies, Charles Taylor writes in *A Secular Age*, is to prevent suffering.

Suffering is inevitable. On the day of her mother's funeral, C. got stung by a bee. The courtyard of the family house was full of people. The child, in the infinity of her four years, between the shock of the pain and the welling up of tears, scanned the crowd urgently for her one source of comfort and then cut short the search, having learned at a stroke the meaning of absence and death.

The scene, says Christian Bobin, which lasted only a few seconds, was the most poignant I have seen. There comes a moment for all of us when a knowledge past consoling enters our soul and rends it. It is in light of that moment, whether it has already come to us or not, that we should speak to one another, love each other and if possible laugh together.

Our tour ends with what John Wesley called the "heart strangely warmed." "The pregnant heart," says Jack Gilbert, "is driven to hopes that are the wrong size for this world." The disciples had hoped that Jesus was the one to redeem Israel. Their hope was dashed; they returned home in despair. When their eyes are opened to recognize Jesus, they realize their hearts burned within them as he revealed to them the meaning of their experience.

Bit by bit, with the accumulation of experience and wisdom, comes a moment when the landscape is transformed, is seen in a new light. A spring is touched, a reality always there discloses itself in its awe-inspiring majesty and intimate nearness and becomes the ruling fact of existence; continually presenting its standards, and demanding a costly response.

This was the experience of Lucie Christine (a pseudonym) who was not conscious of any jolt or dislocation of her life, but only of a disclosure of its true meaning and direction, on the day when she seemed to see before her eyes the words "God Only!" and received an overwhelming

conviction of God's reality which enlightened her mind, attracted her heart and gave power to her will.

The moments when our hearts are pierced, the moments when our hearts love deeply, the moments when our hearts are slow to face suffering, the moments when our hearts are strangely warmed, are moments of potential awakening to the creative action of God in our lives, to the conception of conscious spiritual life. These are moments when our hearts can become pregnant with a hope large enough to transform our lives in this world.

PRAYER: "The Merciful Heart" by St Isaac of Nineveh, born in the region of Qatar on the Persian Gulf's western shore. He was ordained bishop of Nineveh, the former capital of Assyria. d. 700

The heart's pulsing ache - oh to have
that same heart's burning
for persons, for birds, all manner
of animal and even for the demons.

At the remembrance
and at the sight of all such creatures,
the merciful man's eyes
fill with tears which rise with a great, increasing

compassion that wells
and urges his heart,
so that it grows ever
more tender and cannot endure any

harm or slightest sorrow
for anything found
in creation. Such a man
is ceaseless in tear-attended prayer,

even now, and even for
irrational animals,
and for enemies of truth,
and for all who have it, that they may be both
guarded and forgiven.