

## “Heartwork”



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St. Michael's Episcopal Church

Independence, MO

May I speak with the Breath of God, from the Word of God, in the Name of God, Amen.

- The great reformer Martin Luther once wrote: “More than the pope and all his cardinals, I am afraid of my own heart.”
  - At the time, Luther was under a death edict from the pope in Rome, for his supposed efforts to undermine the Church.
  - Most of us, if we were sentenced to death, or being hunted by the most powerful person in the world, would be terrified.
  - And Luther was. But he was not afraid of his hunter, he was afraid of himself.
  - If you rewind Luther’s story by a few decades you’ll see the same thing. He was a monk, famous for walking around his monastery and repeating the mantra “My sin! My sin! My sin!” Slamming his fist on his chest, as if he could beat his heart into submission.
  - The great Martin Luther, future namesake of the Lutheran Church and forefather of all Protestantism, afraid of his own heart.

- Most of us who are aware of any amount of history know the impact that Luther had, not just on Europe, not just on Christianity, but on all of Western Civilization
  - His work and his writings were enormously influential. They continue to shape the way we function today. Even the way we think.
  - The way we think. The way our minds function. Yes we can understand how a great theologian and philosophical leader can influence our minds.
  - But what about our hearts? Martin Luther was afraid of his own heart, and I think he's taught us to fear it too. but why?
- Look at the readings we heard this morning.
- In Song of Solomon, we heard a love poem.
  - “Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away”
  - The language of romance, of hope, of joy, of love
  - The language of the heart, believing in goodness not because of evidence or argument, but because of deep conviction.
  - The writer is the lover, speaking not just from the heart but *with* the heart. He embraces that heart. He trusts it.

- In the Psalm there's another poem of love and devotion
  - “My *heart* is stirring with a noble song ... You are the fairest of men, grace flows from your lips.”
  - It's a songwriter's loving tribute to his king
  - Not written by a pundit, but a poet.
  - Not with the mind but with the heart.
  - He embraces that heart. He trusts it.
- James takes love in a new direction in the Epistle
  - Reminding people that the *heart* of religion is compassion—to take care of orphans and widows and all the helpless
  - But religion has this way of *deceiving the heart*
- Sadly, I feel like I can relate to that.
  - Last week, as you probably know, I took Sunday off to attend a spiritual retreat (thanks again to those who helped)
  - Going into it, I knew that I needed to pay attention to the relationship between my head and my heart
  - Even though I believe I was born with a pretty sensitive heart, I was programmed by society – by this Luther-

informed Western civilization – to silence my heart and let my head call all the shots.

- Because that’s how we find value in this society, isn’t it? By being rational and smart. By being innovators and problem-solvers. And by being *right*.
- So I had this heart... with all this potential, being diminished inside me, and just waiting to be explored again.
- In other words, I went to this spiritual retreat because I had “heartwork” to do.
- So I’m going to share a pretty ironic confession with you now
  - In the middle of a sermon, where the whole point is for me to talk for 10-15 minutes...
  - That I came to realize at this retreat that my controlling mind has had a device for maintaining that control all along.
  - And that device... is words.
  - As long as I keep talking, my heart stays quiet. And I don’t have to know what’s going on in there.
- Look at James again: “be quick to listen, slow to speak... if people do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts...”

- This is what he's saying! When we talk too much, our hearts go silent.
- Even when I'm not talking, I like to fill my environment up with words. Radio shows, podcasts, audio books, etc.
- All good things, but too much. Too much to give my heart the space to speak.
- Jesus sees this too, in the gospel reading this morning
  - "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me."
  - Just like James, Jesus is watching people talk, talk, talk, while their hearts stay distant. Dormant. Silent.
  - And when this happens, we have automatically missed the point of Faith.
  - Because Jesus makes a powerful case, here and lots of other places, that the heart is the point.
  - I said so in my last sermon, two weeks ago: Your powerful heart can make an invalid sacrament valid, remember?
- But Jesus says that it is from the human heart that all evil things come.

- And this is what happens when, as James says, the heart is deceived. When it's silenced.
- I can't help but think back to Martin Luther, ignoring his heart.
- But noticing it just enough to realize all the deceit and envy and pride and folly in there.
- Then slamming the door shut again.
- It really is enough to make one afraid of one's own heart. It can become a dangerous place, if we neglect it.
- On the other hand... When we open up our hearts, when we listen to and follow our hearts (in other words, when we do the “heartwork”) it becomes the source of beauty, of compassion, and of course... Love.
  - Since bringing that lesson home from the spiritual retreat last weekend, I have begun learning to embrace my heart, like a poet. To trust it, like a songwriter.
  - As a result, I have actually talked less. Seriously.
  - I have been less insistent on filling my quiet spaces up with words, listening to music instead. Or just the silence.

- And in those moments where I did insist on words, I've just looked at myself and thought, "What am I doing? I don't even like this." And I put it away.
- And I've reached out to people I love, sharing my awakened heart with them. Telling them (in a few words) how important they are to me, and really listening when they reply.
- And when I've listened, I've found that I can sit peacefully, without fidgeting or checking my watch or phone all the time. It feels good. It feels steady.
- This morning we've had four Scripture writers, reaching through the centuries, to tell us to give our big, round Western heads a break
  - And to pay attention to our hearts again.
- May each of us learn to embrace our heart. To trust it.
  - And find the head-heart balance that God created in us.
  - Amen.