

Sunday February 11th, 2018  
Transfiguration

Ezekiel 36:22-27 and Matthew 13:10-17  
“The Heart of the Matter”

No matter how many times I see them, I still think the V8 vegetable juice commercials are funny. One particular commercial I've seen recently, has a woman bent over a baby carriage, waving a French fry in front of her, I assume her daughter. The woman is talking in a way most of us do when speaking to a baby; kind of a gibberish. Suddenly, the camera pulls back behind the carriage and we see a little arm and hand swing up and hit the woman in the forehead.

The point being that instead of the French fries, mother could have had a V8 and got some better nutrition. This theme is repeated in a restaurant where a waiter smacks a customer who left his broccoli untouched on his plate, or a great one where a man is feeding his veggies to a dog under the table, when suddenly a furry paw hits him in the forehead. That little smack in the forehead is meant to somehow snap the person back to sensibility.

It is reminding us that by missing your veggies, you are missing something vital to our health. Well recently, through the amazing writing of John Eldredge, God has come up and bopped me in the head and the heart. As I was reading his book “Waking the Dead”, I came across something so obvious, so vital, but so off my radar that I missed it, or at least hadn't incorporated the truth into my life.

Eldredge begins chapter 3 of his book by revealing something I never knew before about a story I thought I knew inside and out. L. Frank Baum wrote a very famous story that was turned into a film that almost everyone has seen at least once. It is the story of a young girl from Kansas named Dorothy, who gets swept up in a tornado, and lands in a new and very scary land. I mean, of course, the fanciful story *The Wizard of Oz*.

Dorothy and her little dog Toto, undertake a harrowing journey to go see the Wizard, in the hopes of finding a way home. The journey is marked by following the yellow brick road, and they happen to meet three new companions. They meet a scarecrow, a tin man and the cowardly lion. It is the Tin Man I wish to talk about for a moment, because the movie left out a crucial part of Baum's original story. The Tin Man in the written story, was originally a real man, who had been in love with a beautiful Munchkin maiden.

It was his dream to marry her, once he could earn enough money to build them a cottage in the woods. The Wicked Witch hated his love, and she cast a spell on him which caused him to injure himself, so that one by one, his limbs had to be replaced with artificial ones, made of tin. At first this seemed an advantage to the tin man, as it allowed him to work nearly as powerfully as a machine. He was sure he would reach his goal.

Meaning his heartfelt goal, which of course was, to make enough money to build the cottage in the woods, and marry his beloved Munchkin girl. Then the Tin Man, in the original novel goes on to tells Dorothy and the scarecrow what happened next.

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*“I thought I had beaten the Wicked Witch then, and I worked harder than ever; but I little knew how cruel my enemy could be. She thought of a new way to kill my love for the beautiful Munchkin maiden, and made my axe slip again, so it cut right through my body, splitting it into two halves. Once more the tinner came to my help and made me a body of tin. Fastening my tin arms and legs and head to it, by means of joints, so I could move around as well as ever.*

*But alas! I now had no heart, so that I lost my love for the Munchkin girl, and I did not care whether I married her or not...*

*My body shone so brightly in the sun that I felt very proud of it and it did not matter now if my axe slipped, for it could not cut me. There was only one danger-that my joints would rust; but I kept an oil can in the cottage and took care to oil myself whenever I needed it. However, there came a day when I forgot to do this, and, being caught in a rainstorm, before I had thought of the danger my joints had rusted, and I was left to stand in the woods until you came to help me.*

*It was a terrible thing to undergo, but during the year I stood there I had time to think that the greatest loss I had known was the loss of my heart. While I was in love I was the happiest man on earth; but no one can love who has not a heart, and so I am resolved to ask Oz to give me one. If he does, I will go back to the Munchkin maiden and marry her.*

*Both Dorothy and the Scarecrow had been greatly interested in the story of the Tin Woodsman, and now they knew why he was so anxious to get a new heart. “All the same,” said the Scarecrow, “I shall ask for brains instead of a heart; for a fool would not know what to do with a heart if he had one.” “I shall take the heart,” returned the Tin Woodsman; “for brains do not make one happy, and happiness is the best thing in the world.”*

Notice that in Baum’s story, the Tin man was once a real man who was alive and in love. But after a series of blows, his humanity was reduced to efficiency. He had become a sort of machine-a hollow man. At first, he didn’t even notice, because his condition made him an excellent woodsman, as any person who forgoes their heart for productivity soon discovers.

Notice also, that it was the Wicked Witch who brought this disaster upon him out of a hatred for his love. Baum’s epic tale reminds us that the enemy knows how vital the heart is, even if we are blind to it, and will use all his forces to disable or deaden our hearts. By taking your heart, the enemy has essentially taken you, and you are crucial to the story God has written.

The enemy has been very effective in his strategy, because many of us have become modern “Tin People”. We too have suffered a series of blows over time, and we too have seized upon efficiency, business, and productively as the life we now lead. For so many of us, we have become empty, hollow, shells; longing to get our hearts back.

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The point that God was trying to get across to me, is that the heart, not the mind, is central to everything; and the mere fact we need to be reminded of this, shows how far we fallen from the life we were meant to live.

What may surprise you, because it did surprise me, is that the heart is the subject addressed more than anything else in all of scripture; more than works or service, more than belief or obedience, more than money, and even more than worship. Maybe God is trying to tell us something vital that we have forgotten. Maybe, as I stated earlier, God has been trying to smack us in the forehead with this truth.

Consider just a few passages:

*Love the Lord you God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.* (Deut. 6:5) Jesus called this the greatest commandment and notice that heart comes first.

*Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.* (1 Sam. 16:7)

*Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.* (Luke 12:34)

*Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding.* (Prov. 3:5)

*Your word I have treasured in my heart that I may not sin against you.* (Ps. 119:11)

*These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.* (Matt. 15:8)

*All a man's ways seem right to him, but the Lord weighs the heart.* (Prov. 21:2)

According to scripture, the heart can be: troubled, wounded, pierced, grieved, and even broken. Thankfully, it can also be cheerful, glad, merry, joyful, rejoicing. The heart can be divided, it can be wise or foolish, and it can be steadfast, true, upright, stout, and valiant. It can be frightened, faint, cowardly, melt like wax. The heart can be wandering, forgetful, dull, stubborn, proud, hardened, wicked and perverse.

According to Proverbs 4:23, the heart is the very “wellspring of life” within us, the very essence of our existence, the center of our being, the fount of our life. Now think about your life for a moment. Why, are so many people: frustrated and bored with their jobs, marriages, recreation, volunteering or relationships? Why do they dread Monday mornings? Let’s face it; their hearts are not in it.

How many things in our lives have we arrived at by listening to anything else rather than our hearts? Why do so many relationships fail; because one or both partners no longer have a heart for making it work? Why, are so many people, depressed and discouraged? They’ve lost heart. Somewhere along the way, in a moment of carelessness or desperation, we gave our hearts away, and now we can’t get them back.

The heart is what defines us, and what determines our character, which is what Jesus states in our gospel lesson, and he taught using parables. Stories, whether they are parables from the bible, epic myths like Lord of the Rings, or The Wizard of Oz, speak not to the mind, but to the heart. The mind deals with facts, but the heart deals with meaning. For example: the fact is your son or daughter, are still not home by 2am.

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That may be the fact, but the reason, or the meaning of their lateness is what is of value, and that comes from the heart. People who live from the mind only come across as cold, and distant, and detached from life. Yes, they may be physically present, but so is your computer. Those who live in the mind shed few tears, and maybe that is why they choose to live there. It's their motive.

And this is what Jesus is getting at in so much of what he talks about. What is your motive? What rules your motives? Why did you remember your wedding anniversary; was it because you love your spouse, or because if you forgot, you would have to face the music? Why did you flatter your boss; could it be your performance review is coming up?

In Matthew 5:20, Jesus says that we don't have any hope in heaven if our righteousness doesn't surpass that of the Pharisees. How can that be? Well, the Pharisees were pillars of the religion, model citizens, and sticklers for following the rules. Yes, they were all that, but Jesus says they were hypocrites. They prayed to impress men with their spirituality. They gave to impress people with their generosity.

Their actions looked good, but their motives were all wrong. Their hearts, as the saying goes, were not in the right place. And a person's character is determined by their motives, and motive is always a matter of the heart. The scriptures also locate our conscience in our hearts. Paul writes that even those who do not know God's law "show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences bearing witness." (Rom. 2:15)

That's why it is so dangerous to have our hearts hardened by silencing our consciences, and why the offer of forgiveness is such good news, to have our "hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience." (Heb. 10:22) What nonsense we perpetrate, when we believe that the mind equals reason, and the heart equals emotion. Solomon is remembered as the wisest man ever, and it wasn't because of the size of his brain. Rather when God offered him anything in the whole world, Solomon asked for a wise and discerning heart." (1 Kings 3:9)

The heart is where our deepest thinking takes place. The heart is where the vital things of life are stored. Remember in the Christmas story when Mary, after witnessing all these events, is said to "Ponder them in her heart". (Luke 2:19) It is your heart pondering deep things that keep you up at night. If you fear heights, no amount of reasoning is going to get you to bungee jump. And when asked why, you cannot explain it, other than it's your conviction you don't want to jump.

In Proverbs 23:7 we have this truth, "As a person thinketh in his heart, so is he" (KJV) It is the thoughts and intents of the heart that shape a person's life. The Apostle Paul wrote, "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord', and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified." (Rom. 10:9-10) Therefore, you do not belong to God, you are not a Christian at all, until you engage the heart, believe with the heart."

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No wonder Jesus quotes Isaiah in our Gospel lesson, “For the hearts of these people are hardened, and their ears cannot hear, and they have closed their eyes-so their eyes cannot see, and their ears cannot hear, and their hearts cannot understand, and they cannot turn to me, and let me heal them.”

If we learn nothing else as a fellowship, we must learn that what matters is not our activity, our doctrine, or our physical presence; but rather what matters is our hearts. In Matthew 7:22-23 Jesus says, “Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not do all sorts of Christian things; amazing things?’” And Christ will say, “I never knew you.” The point of our lives is not activity, or efficiency, but intimacy with God.

Just like in a marriage, you can take a course on anatomy, or psychology, but it won’t help you love your spouse. Jeremiah wrote of God saying, “You will find me, when you seek me with all your heart.” Are we as a church family seeking God with our hearts?

This is vital, because without our hearts, we cannot have God. Without our hearts we cannot have love. Without our hearts we cannot find the work we were meant to do. In other words, without your heart, you cannot have life. It is the offer of God to an abundant life just as Ezekiel wrote:

“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.” (Ezekiel 36:26-27)

May it be so with this church family?