



An Affirming Ministry of the United Church of Canada, located on Treaty 4 Territory

Sermon: Heart | Guest Preacher Sharlene McGowan Sunday, March 21, 2021 | The Fifth Sunday of Lent

If you were to guess how many times the Bible talks about the heart, what would your guess be? Two hundred, three hundred, or even four or five hundred times? One source I read said that Strong's Concordance of the King James Bible says that the heart is mentioned 826 times and other sources claim over 1000 times.

In the Bible, the heart is seen as the locus of a person's moral, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing and intentions. The heart drives all human desire and deviation, compassion, craving, and corruption. The heart is where passion flows; it is the domain of the soul and the wellspring of all appetites. It is little wonder that it is mentioned so frequently from Genesis to Revelation.

The first scripture I found which references the heart is from Genesis, chapter 6, verse 5: "The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time." This, of course, was just prior to the story of Noah and the flood.

The ancient Greeks and Romans also considered the heart to be the locus of human emotion, motivation, and holding place for love. The typical symbol for the heart was first found on a coin about 500 years B.C.E. although some scholars suggest it was an image of a fennel seed and not a heart; by 1344 the heart symbol as we know it today appeared in a picture book called *The Romance of Alexander*. Interestingly, the ancient Romans thought that a specific vein ran from the fourth finger of the left hand directly to the heart: This may be why, still today, we wear our wedding bands on that finger.

Throughout millennia, literature, too, has referred to the heart as the origin of all human emotion and motivation. Shakespeare, for example, wrote a lot

about the heart: One of my favourite quotes is from *Henry V* written about 1599: "A good leg will fall, a straight back will stoop, a black beard will turn white, a curled pate will grow bald, a fair face will wither, a full eye will wax hollow. But a good heart...is the sun and moon...for it shines bright and never changes, but keeps its course truly."

There are numerous other examples of how authors, poets, and singers spoke about the heart in their writing and music: Wordsworth wrote, "My heart leaps up when I behold a rainbow in the sky" and Robert Burns penned, "My heart's in the Highlands, my heart is not here, my heart's in the Highlands, a-chasing the deer..." We all know, of course, where Tony Bennett left his heart and how Celine Dion's Titanic heart will go on. Bonnie Tyler had a total eclipse of hers and the Bee Gees wondered how you can mend a broken one.

So, the heart is a big deal. It was a big deal in ancient times, during the days of Bible writers, throughout the past centuries, and remains so even today.

All three of our scriptures today, Jeremiah, Psalm 51, and our Gospel from John, talks about heart, too, but all three in different ways: In our scripture from Jeremiah, years of exile had shown some people to be disobedient to the external laws and consequently less than faithful: God therefore made a new covenant to transform the law from the external stone tablets to the internal heart, the centre of faith and righteousness: "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts," the scripture says. This was a new covenant for people of faith to better understand that their own thoughts and feelings would be the motivating factors in their faith journeys.

Our Gospel in John tells us that some people, namely Greeks (who may have represented outsiders), requested to see Jesus. By now Jesus had performed a number of miracles and word was likely getting around. People wanted to see for themselves and meet this Jesus they had heard so much about. Andrew and Philip tell Jesus about this request and Jesus says, "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." Jesus was foreshadowing the importance of his death and resurrection but, still, it was an uncomfortable thing for him to address: "Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say?" Jesus wonders. Should he ask God to save him from his death? No, for that is why Jesus has come to humankind and, in the process, glorifies God.

In response, God responds audibly for the benefit of the people present, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again." Jesus displays for us what we should

all do when our own hearts are troubled: We should draw closer to God and he, in turn, will draw closer to us. This advice is even found in scripture in James, chapter four, verse eight where we are advised to, in the process of drawing closer to God, also purify or cleanse our hearts.

And this brings us full circle to our Psalm today, Psalm 51. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me." In this Psalm we see a repentant David ask for God's saving grace and to create in him a clean heart to go forward into a life which is different from the one he lived in the past. With a cleansed heart, we, too, can restore our faith where our faith has been weak and therefore draw closer in relationship with God.

So, big deal that it is, it's no wonder the heart is spoken of so frequently throughout the ages including in all our scriptures for today, the fifth Sunday in Lent. We are reminded that from the heart is the wellspring of love and, as we journey forward to Easter, we do so with hearts full of love and gratitude for the live-saving grace God bestows upon us through the gift of his Son, our Saviour. Amen.