

“LIVING BY HEART”

By The Rev. Dr. Cynthia Rigby

Deut 6:4-9, Acts 2:29-47

(07-19-20)

Good morning everyone. It's my privilege to be your preacher here this morning at Richmond Presbyterian Church. I wish I were there in person, of course, but I'm glad that technology enables us to overcome the distance caused by the coronavirus. We had a great week in Vancouver, well me in Austin and your pastor, Victor Kim, in Vancouver and all the students from the Vancouver School of Theology zooming in and talking about why doctrine matters to real life. What a wonderful pastor you have and I'm sure you are a wonderful congregation and I hope to meet you face to face in-person sometime soon. Let us join in prayer before the service.

And now, Lord May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of each heart gathered together in your presence this morning be acceptable in your sight for you are indeed our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

I've been wearing my heart on my sleeve quite a bit these days. I imagine that's not that surprising though. I think maybe Americans are wearing their hearts on their sleeves even more than Canadians these days. You seem to have things a lot more under control. I've seen the graphs; coronavirus for you, coronavirus for us.

On Wednesday morning I got up and saw the news and went into the zoom class and told the students that I had a confession to make that I was kind of in a thin place meaning that my heart was feeling kind of burdened, kind of twisted, kind of broken, broken hearted actually. I'd woken up that morning and on the news it said that my county in Austin, Texas had run out of hospital space. There are so many bodies as a result of coronavirus deaths that we were looking for big trucks so we can refrigerate in order to preserve the bodies until they can find a place in the morgue. That's pretty depressing stuff that kind of puts everyone on edge after a while. And the same morning I also got the news which is categorically different but still significant that my two teenage kids; I have a boy who's 16 and a girl who's 14, aren't going to have marching band this spring due to the virus and the possibility of contagion. And my son, he was really excited he was going to be drum major and my daughter she's a freshman, she was kind of excited about her brother, her big brother being a drum major and giving him a hard time and is just good dynamics that they're gonna miss out on. So my heart was stretched to the limit and I called my being in a thin place. Being in a thin place isn't all that bad sometimes. When you're in a thin place you can breakthrough into new insights. You're ready for something to happen or something to change, which is part of our Storey for today. Meanwhile, I didn't even mention the hardest thing for all possibly, different thing anyway is the racism in our country all over the world. This death of George Floyd and the repercussions, not only that, but that was the final straw of all the examples likely and over a long courses of time of black lives not mattering. Is my heart up to all of this? Is your heart up for all of this? This is the same part is being stretched and twisted. This is the heart that Deuteronomy says we're to Love God with. Is there room to love God and worry about all this stuff? I mean, how much can the heart bear?

There are texts from Acts. There's talk about being cut to the heart. Cut to the heart, what does that mean? How is being cut to the heart different from having our hearts being broken? Our hearts being filled. I'm thinking that this text, I'm hoping that this text, has something to teach me, teach us, about being in a thin place and how to interpret this heart stuff in ways that are consistent with the will of God in ways that bring the blessings that God desires for us in ways that can counteract our broken heartedness.

The Story in Acts chapter 2 takes place on Pentecost. We celebrated Pentecost a few weeks ago. The Holy Spirit comes and everyone speaks many languages and Peter gets up and seizes the moment to give a speech, to give a sermon, to tell the story of Jesus Christ. And he has a really interesting and strong outline to assure me. He gets up, in part one, he talks about what is happening, standing in wonder before the work of the Spirit. This is something I think we all agree we need in our churches today. We need to re-enchant the life of the church; to give attention to mystery; the work of the Spirit. Peter's got it right there and then he connects what has happened to the story of Jesus Christ. This man, his life, his death, his resurrection. And he connects that too, to The Old Testament witness during the Prophet Joel and to the Psalms. And then he leaps the move where our text picks up today. The final and third part of his sermon is narrated. He connects this event, this connection to Jesus, is connected to the old testament in the Bible to the people themselves, the people who are gathered are all Jews, in the sense they are from various nations and speak various languages, and he says to them, more or less, all of this has to do with you. Unfortunately, he also says it has to do with him. He leaves off the third section by saying, "My fellow Israelites."

Now, before I go any further, I want to point out that this text we are talking about today has been used to promote anti-Semitism. Why? Because what Peter tells them, the people gathered there, that they are responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus. Now we know that it is the Roman state that killed Jesus. But I think what Peter's after is reminding the Jews gathered there that his Jewish disciples were mainly Jews. So who is he talking about? The people who are followers of Christ, who abandoned him at the time of Jesus trial and persecution. And the Jews gathered there weren't necessarily disciples yet, but all of us, his point is that all of those gathered have some kind of complicity in the death of Jesus. So he says to them, knowing that the Romans did crucify Jesus, he says to them, the Jews gathered there: "You are responsible. You crucified Jesus." I think he would have said that to you and I, if we had been there. He would have looked at us and say "you crucified Jesus" and he would look at himself in the mirror and say, "I crucify Jesus". Remember, Peter denied Jesus three times on the day before Jesus died. So we don't necessarily have to interpret this text anti semitically. And the way to avoid that is to think about how it's directed to us. How are we part of the Story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection?

Well, Peter is an effective creature because he's trying to help his listeners acknowledge their complicity in the unjust system that led Jesus to be killed. And he's trying to raise awareness served at the spirit and convict, heal, and transform. And this is exactly what happens. Every preacher's dream, right. According to verse 737 Peter's words made his listeners to recognise that, hey, wait a minute, this is not only a good story, an interesting story, a beautiful story, a mysterious story. This is a story about us, it's our story. And as soon as they realised it is about us,

they are cut to the heart of Jesus. Cut to the heart. And they say to Peter and the other Apostles “Brothers, what should we do?” I asked myself, when was the last time I was cut to the heart? Not just deeply moved, not just profoundly moved, but moved to the point of transformation, my own transformation, found surprises in myself, in my guts, in my life, not simply undone, but formed and determined in such a way that my response to that occasion was, what should I do? What can I do? When was the last time you were cut to the heart that way? When was the last time I was cut to the heart that way?

One of my favourite cultural illustrations of what this looks like to be cut to the heart is the story of how the Grinch stole Christmas. As you will likely recall the problem with the Grinch is that his heart was 2 sizes too small, remember? He must keep Christmas from coming somehow, and so he steals all of the Whos Christmas paraphernalia, the decorations, the presents, the food, right down to the roast beast. But he can't keep Christmas from coming at all. The Whos come out on Christmas morning, just as they always did, and they sang “la la la la la.” They join hands, they sing with joy and the Grinch's heart, the story says, grows three sizes that day. He returns all the gifts that he stole and he's invited to the table, to himself; cut the roast beef. “You tried to stop Christmas from coming here more or less” tells the crowd gathered there at Pentecost. You tried to stop Christmas from coming, but it came just the same. Remember that guy you crucified? Well, it didn't take. He rose from the dead. He, who ascended into heaven, is exalted at the right hand of the Father. It is he, the one whom you crucified, who has sent us the Holy Spirit on this day. It is He, the one whom you crucified, who is both Saviour and Lord.

To size the branch another example of what it looks like to be touched the heart from my life is, Nelly. Nelly is a real life person, not a cartoon. I first met her when I was with my husband. In 20 years ago, 25 years ago in Pittsburgh, PA, we had just gotten back from year of ministering in the Philippines and were going around with our slide shows. You remember slide projectors, some of you, to listen to sermons.

We had our slides and we taught about the Philippines and one of the points were made about multi-national corporations. Because when we were there we witnessed Del Monte Pineapple Company pushing people off their land so they could use the land for pineapple. They often hired the people back at very, very low wages to work on the fields. It's very controversial, but, the long and the short of it is, we pointed out to this church group of people at a church in Pittsburgh, was that we could afford to buy DelMonte pineapple in the United States by going to a grocery store but the very people who were the pineapple growing experts, the Filipino people, have been pushed off their lands, could not afford to eat pineapple any longer and that was a problem.

20 years later, I went back to the church to preach and teach in this church in Pittsburgh. Then, I was a new student in theology, I was married, had kids, I was the WC Brown professor of theology at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. Woo! And I went in that church. I didn't even know that they'd remember that I was there 20 years earlier. But this woman was there. Nelly was there and she came up to me proudly after whatever presentation I gave then and she said Dr. Rigby, she said, “ I haven't bought DelMonte pineapple for 20 years since you told us about how DelMonte pushes Filipinos off their land”. She had been cut to the heart by the message that we

brought in ways that we, my husband, not had not been cut to the heart. She was cut to the heart and I gotta tell you something, I haven't bought a can of pineapple since. Since seeing her that second time, because her testimony, led me to become cut to the heart, her testimony of how she paid attention to the information we shared that transformed me. She became a preacher to me. The thing about being deeply moved is that it's easier and safer than being cut to the heart. It demands far less of us. You can buy pineapple. If you're deeply moved, you can feel badly about it, but buy the pineapple. To touch the heart, you have to realise that we have something to do with the fact of this pineapple corporation keeping Filipinos off their land, for example. When we're moved, the focus is not on us, but on the issue. It moves us. We can watch our YouTube videos that's violent. Even watching someone get suffocated in eight and a half minutes with bystander standing right there could have stopped it. And we can be moved in the issue about it being too bad about the issue. But when we are cut to the heart, that means we realised that somehow in that issue we have something to do with that issue. We have inadvertently behaved in ways that have contributed to the problem. We can criticise multinational corporations for treating people like chattel for unsafe work environments and unfair wages, but being cut to the heart is far more risky than simply being moved. To be cut to the heart is to recognise something unbearable that we really don't want to know. The suffering has some causal input from us or cut through the heart when we realise our complicity again in the systems for fostering justice. If Peter were preaching to us today, would he say to us, "You and I" he would say, "You are responsible in some way for the death in George Floyd. You held him." Would Peter push me to consider how my behaviours may spread the coronavirus to others? I think he would. And I think I'm wondering how I would take that. I think I would be resistant. Not my fault, not my fault. I'm deeply moved by it. I care about it, but I'm not going to accept that it's my fault in anyway.

One of the most honest theological testimonies about being cut to the heart comes from John Wesley, the founder of the United Methodism. John Wesley lived in the 18th century and worked like a crazy maniac. He was an amazing evangelist. Helped so many people and invented a lot of things. He was very creative but he also struggled with anxiety and depression. And he told the story, a famous story, about his heart being strangely warmed at a time when he was just about to burn out from over-doing his ministry and feeling a lot of disbelieve in his own life. He forced himself to go to a meeting at Aldersgate Church. And at this meeting someone was reading from a very famous document written by Martin Luther; Martin Luther's commentary on the Romans, which if you know anything, even a little about church history, that commentary were where Luther said we are saved by Grace alone, not grace plus works. That changed Luther's Life. And it's pretty exciting thing to hear read. And Wesley was listening to this and this is his own testimony. He said that he realised as he was listening to this, that it was not only for the world but also for him particularly that Christ died. And in realising that God does not simply walk the world in a general way but that the work of Christ is done specifically for him, he testifies, "My heart was strangely warmed". Is this a version of being cut to the heart? My heart was strangely warmed and then he testifies, he figures out what he is going to do and that he was going to pray for his enemies and which is exactly what he did, following what Jesus did on the cross.

I try to imagine what it would have been like to be a member of the crowd standing there listening to Peter at Pentecost; to stand there watching amazed at the sight of the fire and the sound of the many languages being spoken. Maybe I would be one of the people who distance myself from it all and say they must be drunk. Those people have no imagination whatsoever. They couldn't even get to being caught up, to being people moved, right? I think I can be deeply moved pretty quickly but can I make that next step.

Ask yourself this question, can you not only be deeply moved but make that next step, to being touched in the heart. A sign of that is asking then, what shall I do? How would I have respond to Peters' speech? Would I have said, "Well, I'm deeply sympathetic with this horrendous crucifixion, but you know I'm an outsider" Or would I have been able to recognise that I was responsible in some way for killing Jesus, would I have been able to repent. Would I've been able to change my behaviour?

The story about Jesus is a story about you and me Peter insists, and the whole experience is speaking through his words in this text. Peter's words to every one of us not only to Jews gathered there on that day; we have done our part to ruin things. We have been the mess, we've been the ones who try to keep Christmas from coming, the one whose hearts are two sizes too small, the ones who crucified this One who so loved us, but that is truly not the end of the story, for all are trying, the world is not ruined. We're still out. The Whos are still singing, that the Grinch's heart grew so large it bust the mould in which it is always comfortably set. But let's not be naïve. The Grinch story makes it look too easy. The fact is, to position ourselves to love well. As Deuteronomy says, with all our hearts. To position ourselves to be changed. To open ourselves to be cut to the heart is pretty risky as Tony Campolo once put it; the problem with living sacrifices is that they keep jumping off the altar. Already we might feel ourselves retreating from being melted, moulded. I mean, who wants to be melted, who wants to be moulded. Filled and used are okay, but melting and moulding seems a little violating. We're a little too tired to deal with being melted and moulded, and we've got to pace ourselves emotionally, we've got to engage in self-care if we're going to survive all of this. I have to have better boundaries, you might be thinking. Maybe being moved will have to be good enough. Maybe that's all we can bear. To ask what we should do can not only be disruptive but can also make us look foolish.

One of my favourite funny illustrations comes from this novel by Nick Hornby that I highly recommend is called "How to be good". In this novel a convergent middle class husband and father undergoes a transformation. He's not been treating the people around him very nicely. He has a conversion experience. He meets this crazy kind of creature type person and it's converted to being good. And the conversion manifested all kinds of unusual behaviour. For example, one day his wife catches him walking up and down the street, knocking on the neighbours' doors with a yellow tablet and writing down information. She asked him what he's doing. He says "I'm writing down how many free rooms there are on the block". She says why and he says well, "there are all these homeless people around our town and I thought I could match them up with the neighbours and put them in the free rooms since they are just empty anyway." And his wife is horrified, she said, "how are my neighbours gonna understand that." If he were a money driven sleazy cocaine snorter she reflects, it would be easy to explain. They would understand that. But door to door

homeless placement? People aren't going to put up with that kind of nonsense. It will surely cause offence and embarrassment as it normally does. And it's very funny coz why are we so embarrassed by changing our behaviour to behaviours that recognise their own complicity and work for change. When we're cut to the heart, we do embarrassing things. You do things that make people think we're drunk, like speaking in tongues, immersing ourselves in water, devoting ourselves to prayer, and insisting that ordinary bread and ordinary wine are somehow the body and blood of the Messiah that we have crucified.

When we go beyond loving that to loving God with all our hearts, all our minds and all ourselves, and all our strength we do things that will not necessarily elicit applause. We share our possessions. For example, we sell those that we don't need, for example. We give money to those who have needs. Really? We might ask, is it really true that loving God with all our hearts would mean sharing our possessions and maybe even having fewer of them. That really would be a change wouldn't it? Maybe we should stick with only being deeply moved. That way we can stay rich and still be considered sensitive. I asked myself on this day, whether I really have the courage to love God with all my heart, whether I really have the energy to be cut to the heart. Whether I can even bring myself to sincerely ask the question, what I should do, because I might not like the answer. Am I willing to repent? Am I willing to be changed? Here we all are Christian disciples who with Peter called to invite others into the very transformation. But on most days we ourselves are after resist. So maybe we can start this day this week this period of our world history with a re- commitment to laying aside our resistance. I know, I know, we all find hope in the fact of Peter the effective preacher often finds himself resisting transformation. This gives me hope since he is the preacher. Peter objected to Jesus, the suffering, built shelters instead of participating in the Transfiguration when Jesus brought him there. Calm to brotherly love in John Chapter 21 rather than embracing Agape, but the deep love of God and rejected Jesus three times just before Jesus died. Peter, as much as anyone knows how risky it is to love God with everything he's got. And remembering Peters' history helps us re-commit ourselves to being cut to the heart. How much more should we be looking up on Jesus, the one who we crucified could not be cut down? We did our best to stop him. There was just no way. They've gave out the best of all reasons to withdraw God's love from us and instead God came back. Came back again to fill us with His Love. Dear friends, Jesus Christ is not going to stop loving us. If He wanted to stop loving us, He would have done so by now. We did our worst by Him but He kept loving us still. Be inspired to love him as well, to be cut to the heart, to be transformed, that we might live our lives in joy.

What if we just can't love him with everything we've got today? If being moved is the best we can do right now, we still have another chance. And another chance Jesus will keep holding out as he did with Peter for the fullness of our love, for the completion of our transformation. Jesus will keep holding out, reminding us always again that Gods Love is a sure thing. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Gods' love never ever fails.

Thanks to God. Amen