

Sunday, March 22, 2015
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “What’s Inside?”

“I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts;

I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

These are the words that we ought to live by.

This is the promise that we ought to recite each morning and at the end of each day.

Our prayers ought to be directed to the fulfillment of this covenant.

Jeremiah speaks these words of promise to the people of Israel while they are still in exile.

Their lives are steeped in loss and grief.

Their hearts and their spirits are broken.

In earlier chapters Jeremiah scolded the Israelites for their lack of faithfulness to God, but now he brings a new message – words of hope and comfort.

God’s own heart has been touched by the suffering of the people, and God forgives them and promises to bring them home, to restore them and to be in relationship with them always.

Regardless of the Israelites behavior in the past, God is promising something new.

God has promised, through Jeremiah, to become a part of us, to fill our hearts with a love so grand that it will guide all of our actions – essentially control our lives.

When God promises to write his law on our hearts, God is letting us know that each and every one of us is imbued with divinity.

To access God’s law, God’s teachings, God’s love, we will not have to go through teachers, priests, books or even our minds.

We are directly connected to God through our hearts.

In her beautiful study of the myths and meanings of ‘heart’ Gail Godwin writes:

“What is heart? It is the muscle of life, sending our most vital fluid coursing through our veins to every hungry part of our being. It is what keeps us striving against impossible odds; that fortifying something that is the cornerstone of every triumph. It elates us when we discover love and pains us greatly when that love is lost or proves unrequited. It is a gentleness that colors what we give to others.”

Jeremiah’s prophecy reminds us that God grows with us. God provides a new way for us to understand the depth of his love.

We know of God’s covenant with Noah, with Abraham, with Jacob and with Moses.

Each time God reiterates his covenant he offers this assurance that we are his people and He is our God.

When we accept this relationship, when we open our hearts to let God in and allow His abiding presence to become a part of who we are, we are transformed.

Godwin contends that the “most revolutionary part of Jesus’ teaching was that a good inner disposition – a good heart—is more important than following codes for correct external behavior.”

Marcus Borg, writing in *The Heart of Christianity* reminds us “Prior to the modern period, the most common Christian meanings of the word ‘faith’ were not matters of the head, but matters of the heart...the heart is a metaphor for a deep level of the self, a level below our thinking, feeling, and willing, our intellect, emotions and volition.”

“Faith,” says Borg “is our love for God. Faith is the way of the heart.”

I spend a fair amount of time in conversation with people trying to rationalize their lack of faith.

I have found that the argument against religion or faith in God most often follows a scientific proof model – ‘if I can’t see it, touch it, or control it, it doesn’t exist.’

My response is always that faith is not tangible – it cannot be developed from the outside in.

It must be a matter of heart.

It must come from deep inside you – your very being must vibrate with the presence of God.

When we move outside of our hearts, we lose the power of love.

When we rely only on our brains, when we build walls of intellectual theory around our lives, we lose the opportunity to feel God’s life-giving spirit coursing through our veins.

What we must do is let our hearts inform our brains.

It is dangerous to be ruled completely by our emotions and feelings, but equally perilous to ignore our hearts.

In our gospel reading this morning Jesus uses the metaphor of light to describe life of the heart.

“Believe in the light, so that you may become Children of the light.”

His prayer for his disciples, as he knows he is leaving them, is that they will strengthen their inner core – their faith – their hearts, so that they will be able to endure the dark times ahead.

In 1944 Reinhold Niebuhr wrote a short book called ‘The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness.’

Niebuhr, one of the great theologians of the 20th century, used Jesus’ distinction of light and dark to address the challenges of a democratic society.

His commentary is starkly relevant today as we view both world and national events.

Niebuhr’s children of light were the proponents of democracy, optimistic though somewhat naïve about

how society can be rid of evil.

‘Evil,’ say the children of light, ‘can be governed and enlightened by reason.’

The children of light believe that everyone will do what’s best for the people around them – that community is at the center of well-being.

The children of darkness are on the opposite side of the spectrum.

They are filled with evil.

To the children of darkness, there is no law beyond the self;

all that matters to them, is the individual.

They are extremely wise, but evil in their use of wisdom.

In this way, they can truly understand the power of self-interest, and turn it against the children of light.

A 1948 cover story for *Time* magazine described Niebuhr this way "Most so-called liberals are idealists. They let their hearts run away with their heads. Niebuhr never does."

Niebuhr had a keen ability to recognize both the strengths and weaknesses of human beings.

Rooted in faith, he professed the importance of acknowledging the abundant gifts of God while humbly accepting our brokenness and need for God’s mercy and grace.

As we near the end of our Lenten journey, I invite you to look deeply within.

Do you belong with the children of light or the children of darkness?

Examine your heart and discern what is inside of you.

Is it love?

Do you find light and goodness?

Do you see faith?

These are the things that God wrote on your heart when you were created.

Look deeply and make sure that they are shining through any darkness that might have found its way in.

Use your goodness, your love, your light to illuminate the path for others.

You, my friends, were created as children of light –

Let that light shine. Let it shine. Let it shine.