The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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**Open Your Hearts!**

The heart. It is a muscular organ that pumps blood through our bodies, but it is so much more. Located right at the centre of the body, it symbolizes the core of who we are, and so metaphorically, it stands for many, many things. So many of the expressions we use every day refer to the heart: When we say “he stole her heart,” or “she broke his heart” it has to do with romantic love. “He wore his heart on his sleeve,” refers to showing emotion. A person with a “big heart” is emotionally warm and generous while the Grinch has a heart “two sizes too small.” When an athlete “plays with heart” it refers to courage or determination. “He’s got a good heart,” is about a person’s character. “The heart of the matter,” is something’s essence or substance. “In your heart of hearts” means your deepest feelings. “She lost heart” refers to someone’s sense of hope. “Heart and soul” and “with all my heart” mean to devote oneself completely. We talk about “doing my heart good,” “eating your heart out,” “having your interests at heart,” “learning something by heart,” “having my heart set on something,” and “taking something to heart.” However we use it, we never use the heart to refer to something peripheral or insignificant. Because we cannot live without our heart, it always refers to something profound, something vitally important, something central to our life and well-being.

Most Sundays, there is a section in our worship I entitle “Opening Our Hearts” to go along with “Open Minds” and “Open Arms.” Like much of the language of worship, it draws on a deep well of Scripture and tradition, and it is the meaning of that metaphor of the heart that I want to explore this morning.

The word “heart” is one of the most frequent metaphors in the Bible. It occurs 941 times, according to my electronic concordance. For those who wrote the Bible, according to my Bible Dictionary, the heart “was the innermost spring of individual life, the ultimate source of all its physical, intellectual, emotional and volitional energies, and consequently the part of [a person] through which he [or she] normally achieved contact with the divine. In the recesses of the heart dwelt the thoughts, plans, attitudes, fears and hopes which determined the character of an individual; here also God (and… the power of evil) could work in secret to transform that character by implanting new thoughts and feelings.” [R.C. Denton, *Interpreter’s Bible Dictionary*]

The condition of a person’s heart is one of the chief concerns of Scripture. We may look on people’s appearance, “but God looks on the heart” and it is the condition of the heart that really matters to God. And it matters to God because it affects our relationships with one another. The heart can be open to God and neighbour in love and compassion, or it can be closed, as Pharaoh’s heart was hardened and cruel in the time of Moses. Most of us have hearts that are partly open and partly closed. I know when I am tired and overwhelmed, my heart is more closed than when I am rested and refreshed. In his book *The Heart of Christianity,* Marcus Borg lists a number of characteristics of people with closed hearts. These characteristics are linked to other metaphorical ways of describing our spiritual predicament. I invite you to ask how these characteristics describe your heart:

* A closed heart is spiritually blind and spiritually deaf and is unable to perceive what is really important.
* A closed heart affects the way we think. We engage in “rationalizations,” and hide from others and ourselves the real reasons we act as we do.
* A closed heart traps us. We are often in bondage to destructive, superficial desires.
* “A closed heart lacks gratitude. A successful person with a closed heart feels self-made and entitled; or if life has gone badly, the closed hearted person feels bitter and cheated. But a closed heart is not grateful.
* “A closed heart is insensitive to wonder and awe. The world looks ordinary when our hearts are closed.” [Borg, p. 152]
* A closed heart is isolated, cut off from other people, from creation, from God. It is self-preoccupied and turned upon itself.
* A closed heart lacks compassion and is unable to feel the feelings of others.
* A closed heart is insensitive to injustice.

To some extent, we are all like this, but some are more like this than others. People with severely closed hearts may be violent, brutal, arrogant and greedy. Those with only mildly closed hearts may be judgmental, insensitive, and self-centred. Some days our hearts are more open than others. When I am tired, burned out, or stressed, my heart is less open than days when I am relaxed and refreshed. Sometimes we need to close our hearts, because we have been wounded and can’t take any more. But sometimes, in trying to protect ourselves, we build such walls around our hearts that we cut ourselves off from the best things in life.

Closed or hardened hearts create a kind of shell around us. Like an egg, that shell needs to be broken open so that we can enter into fullness of life. The breaking of the shell can be painful and terrifying. Having your heart broken doesn’t feel great. We fear our hearts will shatter into a million pieces. But there is another possibility.

A great rabbi was once asked by a student why the Scriptures say that we are to place the holy words “on” our hearts. Surely, the student argued, “it would be better to place the holy words in our hearts.” The rabbi replied that as we are, we are incapable of receiving the holy words into our hardened hearts. All we can do is get them as close as possible, waiting for that moment when our hearts break, and the words can fall in, and perform their healing function of holding together the pieces of a broken heart. The broken heart is held together by grace.

Frederick Buechner calls this the “hatching of the heart.” [quoted in Borg, p. 154] Like a chick breaking through its protective shell, we need to hatch from the condition of a closed heart into new life, into the condition of the open heart.

* The open heart is sensitive – our senses of sight and hearing are acute. I remember talking to a young man who had just been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. That experience was hatching his heart. He told me that he was seeing things in life he had never noticed before. “It is like,” he said, “I have a third eye.”
* “The open heart is alive to wonder, to the sheer marvel of [life]. We have a sense of wonder and awe at even the most commonplace experiences. The other day, I was lamenting the end of summer when I noticed the subtle mixtures of green and yellow leaves. I felt the shell around my heart crack and an appreciation of beauty fill me. The world is never ordinary.
* An open heart is grateful, and has a sense of being touched by grace, being blessed beyond what you deserve, being blessed even in the most difficult experiences of life. When I have experienced illness, it is the messages of support and encouragement that sustain me. I am not alone. I am blessed.
* An open heart feels compassion, a sense of deep emotional connection to the sorrows and struggles of others. George Eliot, perhaps the greatest novelist in the English language, after her own experience of having her heart hatched, said that “no one who has ever tasted it will deny [that] the sense of loving, pitying fellowship with the fullest human lot [is] the chief blessedness of our life.” [“Letters”]
* An open heart is outraged by injustice. This is why Jesus chased the moneychangers out of the temple. His heart was open, and he could not be unmoved by the injustice he saw.

To hatch from a closed heart to an open heart is to hatch from slavery into freedom, from darkness into light, from sin into salvation. Having an open heart is more fun, more fulfilling, and more exciting than being closed.

To open your heart is to become vulnerable, and a vulnerable heart is open to being wounded and broken. There is no way to open your heart except through opening it, letting go of fear and anxiety and allowing yourself to feel, letting go of self-preoccupation and paying attention to the people and creation around us, letting go of the rationalizations and justifications and trying to be honest with others and, the hardest thing of all, being honest with ourselves, letting go of the comfortable status quo and opening ourselves to the possibility of being changed by that openness. Our hearts are hatched “by grace through faith.”

There are, of course, “means of grace,” times and places and experiences which help to thin the crust around our hardened hearts. For many people nature is such an experience of grace. On the edge of a lake or river, or before a mountain vista, or in a quiet place in a garden, we can feel our hearts open and connect to an earth which is filled with the glory of God. A powerful novel or a captivating film can provide such an experience. A well-told story can awaken us to compassion or a new way of seeing. Music, poetry, art and dance can evoke long repressed emotion and hatch hardened hearts. Meeting a person from another culture, race or nation can break through our stereotypes and rationalizations and help us to understand another’s perspective. Practices of prayer and worship are also means of grace that, bit by bit, over time, break through the hardened shell of our hearts and open us to abundant life.

God cares about the condition of our hearts. How is it with your heart? Is it hard and impenetrable, or open? The former Secretary General of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjold, wrote a prayer with which I would like to conclude. Let us pray:

Give us pure hearts, that we may see you; / Humble hearts, that we may hear you;

Hearts of love, that we may serve you; / Hearts of faith, that we may abide in you. Amen.

**Selected Passages from Scripture:**

1 Samuel 16:7 - the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.

Deuteronomy 6 – 4 Hear, O Israel:… 5 You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

Psalm 51 - 10 Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

Jeremiah 17 – 9 The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse—who can understand it? 10 I, the Lord, test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways.

Jeremiah 31 – 33 But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts…

Ezekiel 11 – Thus says the Lord God: 19 I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh…

Matthew – 58 “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God….

619 “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth… 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also….

22:37 – ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ 38 This is the greatest and first commandment.

Mark 7 - Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, 19 since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? It is what comes out of a person that defiles. 21 For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come…

2 Corinthians 3 – you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

Ephesians 3 – 17 I pray… that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.

**Additional Passages:**

Proverbs 3 – My child, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments… 5 Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight.

Isaiah 6 (as quoted in Matt 13) – 15 For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes…

Romans 10 - if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.10 For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.

1 Corinthians 4:5 – the Lord … will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart.