

Sermon: The Power of the Heart

Scripture: John 23:33-43

Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans

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On this the last Sunday of the church year we are confronted with the image of Jesus on the cross forgiving his persecutors and speaking a word of hope to the thief hanging beside him. It's a harsh image that we expect around Holy Week and Good Friday but it always surprises me with its appearance here the Sunday before Thanksgiving and before the start of advent with its promise of Christmas. So why are we called here and now to meditate upon Jesus' suffering and death?

As many of you know just yesterday we concluded the Be Peace Course that 6 of us from this congregation participated in over the last 4 days. It was a powerful experience in many ways, being educated in and practicing this particular system for achieving peace within and peace without. We've all heard from the pulpit Jesus' commands: "love your enemies" or "judge not lest ye be judged" or "love your neighbor as yourself", right? But how often have you heard it explained exactly how you might go about doing that? Although it's done with secular language, the Be Peace program and process offers a step-by-step procedure for loving our neighbor and enemy and judging not others. It's really quite remarkable and it's spreading, this Be Peace practice. First throughout Costa Rica, in schools all over that country and even in their government practices and now Rita Marie, the founder of the program who led our workshop, is in the midst of launching it more systematically into our nation's schools, because teaching children, specifically, this practice of peacemaking within and without is their primary goal, so that, as you heard Paula say a few weeks ago, with a new generation there might emerge truly a culture of peace.

Our 32 hour course was just the first step in learning this practice, so it's quite an involved process, but in these few minutes I'd like to give you a taste of one aspect of Be Peace and I think we'll also find that though it is a secularly framed process, they speak of listening to the heart for instance instead of listening to God or the Spirit, it's deeply resonant with our faith and specifically with our scripture this morning and the trajectory that we are setting as we enter into advent. And this would only make sense because

truth, one of our names for God, is one and so if there is truth in the Be Peace way and there is truth in the way of Christ then inevitably we are going to find unified.

And so bring back to mind for a moment Jesus on the cross forgiving his crucifiers. What we see in that powerful image is a human response that is a third and higher way between the other two possible responses; namely fight or flight. Jesus could have run away to save himself or he could have fought against his oppressors. Instead he chose a third way, to die, yes, but actually something much bigger and more profound than that, he chose a way that called the people around him, the world really, to a higher dialogue and more profound way for being human.

The Be Peace process seeks that higher dialogue and more profound, peaceful living in part by a practice of heart coherence which was developed by the Heart Math Institute, which is this fascinating blend of science and spirituality. They explain scientifically something that the great spiritual traditions of our world have been suggesting for millennia and that is that there is great power and great wisdom in the heart and that to live our lives fully, as whole human beings, we need to become more effective at accessing the power and wisdom of our hearts. There is this amygdala part of our brains where is seated much of the emotional memory that we have, memories from our lives but even deeper memories of our species, and it's that part of the brain that engages when there some kind of threat coming at us. The amygdala when it is flaring says "fly, run, get away" or "fight, kill, destroy before you are destroyed." Now obviously this is not a useless function of our minds. There might be times when running is the best thing to do and there might be times when we have little other choice than to fight, BUT more often than not when we receive those signals – to defend ourselves at all costs – there are other much healthier and more peaceful and more fully human responses that we can have and those responses come not so much from the mind but rather from the wisdom of the heart... or one might say an alignment of heart and mind.

So what happens, the HeartMath Institute explains, is that when we feel threatened in some way, either a real threat or, as is more often the case, a perceived threat, we lose coherence within ourselves, we get anxious, we panic maybe, and our amygdala that primitive part of the brain gains control. We know this, right? Those times when someone does something that angers us or confronts us or we suddenly find

ourselves in some kind of conflict, someone cuts us off on the road, our pulse begins to race and our heart pounds and our thinking gets cloudy and we find ourselves more reactive and impulsive, maybe, than we would like. That's that state of fight or flight. And it's often only after the fact, once our heart rate has slowed and we find ourselves more calm and centered that we think – "oh, I should have said this, I shouldn't have done that." And that's because we can only access our more fully human selves beyond our animal instincts when we are in coherence within ourselves, when our heart's rhythm and cadence is calm and has brought other parts of the body including the mind into alignment with itself. The HeartMath Institute has done loads of studies which indicate that a coherent state within gives a person more clarity, more capacity to concentrate, more creativity, more empathy with others and so on than when in a state of incoherence. It only makes sense, right? We know that. But then what the Institute also did was to experiment with procedures for how to best achieve at a moment's notice that state of internal coherence so we are not such a victim to the whims of our amygdala. And you know what they found?

They found that bringing one's focus to the heart and feeling a sense of appreciation for whatever it is in a person's life that they are deeply grateful for creates that internal coherence. So then this part of the Be Peace practice involves dropping down from the mind and into the heart, maintaining a heart focus, imagine breathing through the heart, and then bringing to mind, or rather bringing to heart what it is that creates a deep sense of appreciation in you. And it is from that place that coherence is found and the wisdom of the heart can be accessed... or what I might say – it's from that state of internal peace and coherence that we can best listen for the voice of God, of Love, of Wisdom, call it what you will, to guide, direct, and inspire our lives.

It's a pathway to the third way when we experience conflict or strife or are internally incoherent and we want to respond with fight or flight, a practice like this, of stopping and breathing and focusing on the heart and appreciation, helps us access our higher selves, helps us access God. It's not easy, many of us in the course found. It's not easy just to do in a classroom setting much less when you are in a state of distress and yet you can experience the power of it just by practicing it in simple situations throughout the day. Next time you are in distress, angry, anxious, give it a try and see if you can

intentionally settle your heart rate and your inner spirit and then listen more deeply into the situation to see what insights surface.

But to bring this around full circle; don't you imagine that if ever there was a man who lived the fully human life in a high state of coherence for much of his life, that man would be Jesus? How else could he have made the choice not to fight against or fly from his suffering and death but rather to endure it for the higher calling of love? How else could he have chosen not to curse others from the cross but instead to forgive them from it? How else could he have turned to the crucified thief at his side and given him hope instead of despair? This would have only been possibly, ONLY, if Jesus had known a profound sense of internal coherence and peace, only if he had known how to live fully out of the power and wisdom of his heart, which we can say is naturally attuned to God or has been made in the image of God. His mind simply couldn't have brought him there. But his heart did. And you know what happens when one responds out of the power and wisdom of the heart? It doesn't just bring that heart-aware person peace, it brings peace all around them as well, which is why even now 2000 years later people are being drawn in, transformed, made heart-opened by the power of that one man's heart.

And so it is on this last Sunday of the church year we are confronted with the image of our crucified Lord, the fully human one whose heart could not be nailed to a cross but pulses through the world even today reminding us of the power and presence of God, the power and wisdom of the heart. And then next week advent comes, where we begin awaiting for this King of the Heart. And how does this King of the heart come? He comes as a baby whose cooing and burbling, giggling and smiling, whose innocence and vulnerability is maybe the one and only sure way to get us quickly into our hearts and in a state of wonder and appreciation.

**Information about HeartMath in the above sermon comes from the Be Peace Foundations Course developed by Rita Marie Johnson and the Rasur Foundation and the book - The HeartMath Solution, by Doc Childre and Howard Martin, Harper Collins New York, 1999.*