

Prior to sermon, my reflection during “Time for Young Hearts”

Time for Young Hearts – Seeing with our hearts

The image in your bulletin highlights a quote from the beloved “children’s book,” *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupery. The book teaches that the responsibility demanded by relationships with others leads to a greater understanding and appreciation of one’s responsibilities to the world in general. The story of the prince and his rose is a parable about the nature of real love. For me the quote in the bulletin echoes part of the text from one of our Bible Wisdom teachings. In Ephesians, we will hear the author writing to the people of (EFF AH SUS) Ephesus about deepening their connection with God, and opening to God, “**with the eyes of your heart enlightened.**” It brought to mind for me this beautiful quote from *The Little Prince*: “It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.”

I’ve been sitting with this quote all week and imagining what it means to SEE with our hearts. And I tapped further into the wisdom of the book by reflecting on other quotes from *The Little Prince*:

“Where are the people?” resumed the little prince at last. “It’s a little lonely in the desert...” “It is lonely when you’re among people, too,” said the snake.” -----

I’m sure we each have experienced loneliness even when we’re with other people. It happens. It is part of the human condition, and we are comforted in knowing that this is a universal truth.

As a major fan of children’s books, I especially appreciate this gem:

“Grown-ups never understand anything by themselves, and it is tiresome for children to be always and forever explaining things to them” – this reminds me that we are all children of God and benefit from turning our attention to the truths embedded in us since the beginning. Many of us are familiar with the term, “beginners mind” – it is a concept from Zen Buddhism – it refers to having an attitude of openness, eagerness, and a lack of preconceptions.

So often, we let our own assumptions and baggage get in our way. I’ll wrap up this exploration with another quote from *The Little Prince* that illustrates how our assumptions and judgement blind us or trip us up:

“Grown-ups love figures... When you tell them you've made a new friend, they never ask you any questions about essential matters. They never say to you, "What does his voice sound like? What games does he love best? Does he collect butterflies? " Instead, they demand, "How old is he? How much does he weigh? How much money does his father make? " Only from these figures do they think they have learned anything about him.”

What might it look like to root into the wisdom planted within each of us from the beginning? Our natural love of others – their interests and passions, the ways they express themselves, how they relate to us – this is what connects us/not the numbers, not the data. We know all of these truths, deep down, but sometimes, as we get caught up in the day to day, we lose sight and need to be reminded. Let us instead SEE with our HEARTS.

Message “Seeing Jesus in our Neighbors” Rev. Trish Eckert

On this “Reign of Christ Sunday,” I’m mindful of the potent language here, recognizing that such words might shut some of us down. If we look behind the words, however, ultimately, we are talking about the Divine spark, we’re talking about the power of love, we’re talking about seeing that divine spark in one another – it takes us back to the Gospel of Matthew when Jesus says, “Love God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” This is where I gleaned the title of my sermon today, but my message has morphed throughout the week as I have continued to reflect on this week’s Bible Wisdom Teachings and on the purpose of celebrating this final Sunday of the Christian year.

Jesus walked the talk. He showed us what it looks like to love so powerfully. Of course, that kind of love threatens other forms of power, and Jesus was crucified for the radical truths that he was teaching. The resurrection of the Christ transcends every earthly claim on the human heart. Despite all of our worries, struggles, and mistakes, regardless of all the time and energy we put into the distractions of modern culture, Christ is the beginning and the end. As the theologian and author Cynthia Bourgeault points out, “The knowledge of Jesus Christ is a unitive knowledge. It is the luminosity of [each of our] own true and eternal being.” She taps into the wisdom of the Christian mystics, (and I would count her among them) as she writes, “...our whole universe is profoundly permeated with the presence of Christ. Christ surrounds, fills, holds together from top to bottom this human sphere in which we dwell. The entire cosmos has become Christ’s body, so to speak, and the blood flowing through it is Christ’s love.”

So as we reflect on the ancient words of the prophet Ezekiel in the First Testament and consider the words written to the people of Ephesus in the Second Testament, I invite you to contemplate your place in the world, your travels along your spiritual journey and the relationships you have with yourself, with the divine, and with everyone who crosses your path. These stories continue to speak to our condition in the here and now.

The first Bible Wisdom Teaching this morning comes from the Book of Ezekiel. In these verses, Yahweh calls Ezekiel to prophesy against the shepherds of Israel – their leaders. He is to condemn them for feeding themselves instead of their sheep. They have failed to heal the sick and to see the lost, but have ruled harshly. As a result, the sheep have scattered and have become food for wild animals.

In our time, many of us become uncomfortable when we hear about God's judgment, when we think about God as punishing or calling people to account. I think if we make just a slight shift in our thinking/listening, we'll recognize that those seeking justice need the divine insight, wisdom, and guidance to right wrongs and hold those responsible accountable, to tend to those who are hurting, and to seek a more just balance of power and access to resources.

Richard Rohr writes, *Prophets nurture and evoke a new way of thinking. They give us images and words which subvert our system and tell us that we haven't seen the whole picture yet. Prophets are not just concerned about social change for the sake of social change. They are concerned above all with transformation and freedom of the heart, and then out of that free heart, the prophet says, "Listen." The prophet creates a new, freeing consciousness which allows us to hear the divine word.*

In the verse just prior to the text we heard, Yahweh pronounces this judgment: "I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them."

Ezekiel's text gives us hope – we are reminded that God is looking out for the lost, the wounded, the hungry, the tired. God is rebuking the false shepherds for not only failing to care for the vulnerable and the weak, but for using their power to gain even more resources and power, causing even more suffering.

Hope can be a loaded word. For those in grief, it is common to encounter well-meaning people who seek to stir our hope by schooling us in God's ways, which are essentially indescribable, and so they point to our loss as being part of a larger plan; promising that someday we'll understand the bigger mystery that is unfolding in front of us now. I have a tremendous tolerance for mystery, a great capacity to abide the unknown, but when I'm in the throes of grief, or when I'm witnessing someone else's deep suffering in the wake of loss, it's not enough to just chalk it up to mystery, to a larger plan. It's not that I'm not interested in the bigger mystery, or in knowing that I might have a better grasp of it someday in another world. It's just that someday is not, in itself, sufficient to get me through this day, to move me from one moment to the next in this world where my dear friend is not.

In the midst of my grief, what I know is that hope, inexplicably, has not left me. That it is stubborn. That it lives in me like a muscle that keeps reaching and stretching, or a lung that keeps working even when I do not will it, persisting in the constant intake and release of breath on which my life depends.

The apostle Paul (or, perhaps, the author who wrote in his name) well knows the deep presence of mystery in our life with God. Keep in mind his words from 1st Corinthians 13: "For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now

I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.” But in today’s text we hear that he, too, is uninterested in simply abiding the mystery or locating our hope in a “someday” realm. In this morning’s reading from Ephesians, he prays quite specifically for his friends to be illuminated here and now, praying that God will give them a spirit of wisdom and revelation as they come to know God. He prays that the eyes of their hearts will be enlightened. “So that you will have the hope God has for you. May you live in wonder and trust of the gifts we all receive as God’s Beloved. May you feel in your bones the immeasurable greatness of the power of love when we trust it.

Paul is talking about a knowing that is tied with resurrection. He is talking about a hope that is bound together with the life of the risen Christ. “Love is the power that raised Christ from the dead, the power that orders the universe, the power above all human systems, every rule and authority and dominion, and above every seen or unseen power, force or value you could imagine.”

Paul makes clear that Christ, in turn, is putting that power to work in us, and not just for someday, but also for now: that this hope is active in our lives as we press into the mystery that attends us. Even as Paul writes about the risen Christ being seated in the heavenly places, he also bears witness to a Christ who wore our flesh and abides with us still, hoping for us when our hope is shattered, breathing new life into us, encompassing us in the arms of a community that holds us with hope.

Hope is not always comforting or comfortable. Hope asks us to open ourselves to what we do not know, to pray for illumination in this life, to imagine what is beyond our imagining, to bear what seems unbearable. It calls us to keep breathing when beloved lives have left us, to turn toward one another when we might prefer to turn away. Hope draws our eyes and hearts toward a more whole future but propels us also into the present, where Christ waits for us to work alongside toward a more whole world now.