

## 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A: February 13, 2011

The Church makes many claims about God – about who God is and what God does and what God is like. We make big claims, and the biggest of all, the one that is at the core of all our claims is that God is love.

Above all else, we say, God is love.

We sing songs about the God of love, we pray to the God of love, we offer the gift of ourselves to the God of love.

And then, this morning, which happens to be the day before Valentine's Day, we hear these lessons, most of which have to do with Law.

And we may be taken aback, especially by today's gospel, which contains phrases such as,

"if you call your brother or sister 'you fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire."

Now, I've got two brothers and three sisters.

What chance do you think I've got if this is the measurement?

And then there's

"...and if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell."

These are words from the God of love, from the very heart of God made flesh, Jesus?

I'm afraid there's no way for me to make this easier for you.

This is not one of those Well-if-you-read-it-in-the-original-Greek-it-sounds-very-different texts. There isn't a way to get around this lesson.

No, we need to go through it, get to the very heart of it, and therefore, to get a glimpse of the heart of God.

Listen to the heart of God.

Today's gospel says a lot about what we would hear if we listen to our hearts and if we listen to God's heart.

We know the joys of listening to the sounds of the heart.

We have felt, even heard the sound of our own hearts beating in excitement.

Some of us have heard the heartbeat of a baby not yet born, but already audible and very much alive.

We know that listening to our hearts can give us a diagnosis of a healthy or an unhealthy heart.

But we also know the heart is more than a vital physical organ.

"Heart" means the core of our selves in all our most vibrant aspects.

We talk about the human heart as the seat of loving, of compassion, of tenderness, of courage.

Our language knows this: we say, "Take heart." Be assured.

If you have had a change of heart, you have had a shift of perspective, a shift of plans, a significant change in your outlook.

*This sermon was written by The Rev. Theo Park and delivered at Christ Episcopal Church, Red Wing. Fr. Theo thanks all those whose material he has borrowed and apologizes to those he has overlooked.*

Heart is the seat of memory: to know something by heart is to know it perfectly.  
Heart is the seat of yearning and desire: to seek with your whole heart is to pursue, to search for diligently, to strive for something with all the perseverance you can muster.

We listen now to the songs of our hearts and of God's heart in today's gospel lesson.

Jesus is sitting with his disciples, teaching them what it means to follow in the path he would have them walk.

Jesus is giving words to the love song of God's heart.

We hear a section of the Sermon on the Mount, a section that began in last week's reading when Jesus said,

"I have come not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it."

What follows today are the illustrations and implications of that statement.

Jesus came not to abolish the law, but apparently to make it even tougher, to make it more exacting. Jesus lists some of the big commandments:

You shall not kill, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not swear falsely.

And were that all, it could make for rather dull preaching.

Yes, of course, the disciples would say, we've heard that before.

We know that's what God wants for us.

But then Jesus goes on to breathe new life, new relevancy into these commandments by explaining what they mean in their fullness – by going to the heart of the matter.

He explains what they mean if we are to love as God loves, because the law tells us what is in God's heart.

Law exposes God's fondest desires for how we would live with one another.

Law also exposes the difference between our hearts and God's heart.

Listening to our hearts does give a diagnosis.

God listens to our hearts and knows

that even if we can keep the commandment not to kill one another, we still hate and despise others.

We are willing to kill relationship with others, to treat others as if they are as good as dead to us.

God listens to our hearts and knows

that even if we can keep a commandment not to commit adultery, we still can disrespect others by treating them as less than fully human.

God listens to our hearts and knows

that even if we can keep from swearing falsely, we are still willing to manipulate others with our words, to lead others astray by what we say, to let our words be meaningless rather than let our yes mean yes and our no mean no.

Our hearts, though we are made in the image of God, do not keep time with the beating of God's heart.

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While God's heart sings out a love song, begun in creation and sung to us still,  
our hearts often fall far short.

The diagnosis: our hearts are diseased, unhealthy, disheartened.  
As the confession we are using at 10:00 puts it,  
"through ignorance, through weakness, through our own deliberate fault  
we have wounded God's love and marred God's image in us."

And so, in God's compassion for our failings, God gives us law.  
In the teaching of Jesus, this is law that will not let our hearts fall short  
of loving as God would have us love.  
It is law that would have us love in a way  
that respects the dignity of every human being,  
as we say in our baptismal covenant.

And it is law that ultimately convicts us,  
because what it demands of us, we cannot do unaided, without God's help.

And here again the law shows us God's love,  
by showing us our failing and driving us into the arms of our compassionate God.  
When I was 11, my friend Mark and I thought it would be fun to build a pipe bomb.  
Or rather, Mark thought it would be fun. I was so scared  
I almost wet myself thinking of it, but it was an exciting kind of scared.  
So for several weeks that summer we worked away in Mark's father's basement  
workshop building a pipe bomb.  
It was about so big and we filled it with gun powder from shells we stole from another  
neighbor, Uncle Howard. This was the early '60s, by the way, in the deep suburbs;  
every adult was every kid's aunt or uncle and nobody ever locked the doors to their  
houses so we little sneak thieves just came and went unobserved.  
Or so we thought.  
Well, came the big day.  
We took it down to the local pond, Mark lit it and threw it, and then we ran like...heck.  
Boy did it make a satisfying explosion!  
Huge water spout. Probably lots of dead fish, too, but we didn't dare hang around.

And then I got home. And there was my mother. Who knew.  
Don't ask me how, she just knew.  
And after a few gentle questions, a little quiet probing,  
All of my guilt and shame came pouring out  
and the next thing I knew I was sobbing in her lap.  
And I was so relieved.

Oh, there was punishment: I had to apologize to Mark's father and Uncle Howard for  
breaking their trust and steal, and to the neighbor in whose pond we threw our bomb,  
and there was both financial restitution and some sort of physical labor.  
But they all forgave us, and mother still loved me,  
and I knew I would never do that again.

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The great poet and Anglican priest John Donne once said that if talk of law and our failing to keep it brought us sadness, then this was good, because it is a holy sadness, because a sense of our separation from God's way is "god's key to the door of his mercy, put into thy hand." God's heart is a rich treasure house of compassion to which our sense of our own incompleteness is the key.

Discovering our failure to love as God loves is not then a cause for despair. No – it is a call back to God, into the arms of God, who loves and strengthens us, and sends us out to love again; bids us love more fully, more perfectly, because although showing perfect love is impossible for us, nothing is impossible with God.

The sound of our hearts and the sound of God's heart are different now. They're meant to sing the same song. So we are given law, that we might know more completely how to love, and when we fail – because we do fail – we are given the key to God's heart, the key to the vast treasure of God's compassion that stands ready for us to take, as of a mother's love for her first born child. The key to a heart that offers us true pleasure, true love.

Take heart. Because our God is a God of love. Our God is love. In that we can be sure.

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