

Sermon TUMC - January 9, 2022

Love the Lord your God with all your HEART

Michele Rae Rizoli

Isaiah 43: 1–7 (Crossing the waters)

Luke 10:25-28 (Loving God)

Luke 3: 15 – 22 (Jesus is baptized and beloved)

Last Summer, as I was driving around town, I noticed these colourful neon hearts in windows all over. I soon learned that they were LED lights, part of a campaign to show support for healthcare workers, a “plug-in symbol of thanks and love.” (To quote the person who created the lights). <https://www.ourglowinghearts.ca/blogs/news/ctv-national-news-coverage> Some of the proceeds go towards the Michael Garron Hospital, in my neighbourhood.

So I ordered two hearts, one for me and one as a gift for a friend who works really hard in healthcare, and who was drained by the stress of Covid. When the box arrived I assembled my heart, ready to put it on display.

There was a touch-sensitive switch that had two wires, one that went to the power source (electricity) and one that went to the light itself. My light was a lovely green and I played around with the dimmer switch sliding it on and off.

I had good intentions of shining that light of support and gratitude into my neighbourhood, but over time, it got glitchy. Sometimes it would work and sometimes it wouldn't, sometimes it would shine very brightly and other times it was so faint that I couldn't tell if it was working.

(For those of you who went into problem-solving mode and are stuck there: I seem to have purchased a faulty switch and it will be replaced this week).

As I thought about our theme for today, Loving God with all our **heart**, this experience with my LED heart seemed to reflect the state of my own spiritual heart lately — Maybe more than I even would like to admit. Sometimes I feel connected to my source, God, ready to glow in gratitude and light, and other times I'm fiddling around in the dark wondering whether the heart even works anymore.

I don't know about you, but it seems like many of us are faltering a bit right now. Winter in January comes with its own challenges (for me especially) but another lockdown and our current political context around provincial lockdown decisions just all feels like a bit too much. It's getting old and discouraging. Some of you have told me you are just barely hanging on, and relying on taking a lot of naps. Trust me, you are not alone in that sentiment or that nap strategy.

Here's where I confess to you that the main reason I included that Isaiah passage at the beginning of the service is because it reminded me of one of the heartwarming Bible promises that I would cling to in hard times in my youth (and still do):

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;  
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,  
and the flame shall not consume you.” “Do not fear for I am with you.”  
(Isaiah 43:2)

To me it is a reminder that God is with us and God's intention towards us is love and care, even in overwhelming times.

I hope that together here today, we can lift our hearts to this faithful God, and find encouragement also in knowing that we are not carrying this burden alone.

Back in Bible times, someone who wanted to do right by God asked Jesus “What must I do to live the way God intended? Or as he put it, “to have eternal life?”

Our translation says that this person was a “lawyer” in the sense that we think of lawyers, but a person who studied and tried to uphold God’s law — the Torah. Torah, is/was in Jewish tradition the collection of guidance that God has provided humankind. It’s how you get to know God and, in doing so, make the world a better place.

Jesus’ answer to the man was to remind him of what he already knew, and to get him to say it by heart:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.” (Luke 10:27)

Some of us know this passage by heart too. There may be nothing sparkly and new here. But there is an important invitation to regroup ourselves in what matters, an invitation to **plug in to the source of Love with everything that we’ve got.**

In this sermon series, which begins today, we’d like to unpack some of the different aspects of this golden rule. We’ve selected the version in Luke that includes it all: heart, soul, strength, mind, other, self. (I often wondered why I couldn’t memorize this properly and then I realized that each gospel has a little bit different order.) We feel that this version in Luke captures a sense of wholeness that has sometimes been overlooked when it comes to our spiritual life. A sense of integration and relationship within ourselves, with others and with God which we really need to draw on right now.

As you know a lot of our faith training — or at least in my experience — was very individualistic and very compartmentalized. Writers like Matthew Fox and Richard Rohr have been pointing out that people are still profiting

from patriarchy's dualistic way of looking at the world, one that pits feeling against thinking, body against mind, spirit against matter, women against men and heterosexuals against homosexuals"<sup>1</sup> abled against disabled, and so on and so forth. You know it, we live in this. The call of the Christian life is to work to integrate these aspects in our relationships with God and the world that we live in. To push against those false divisions and those false antagonisms. To push against the idea that we are on our own rather than in ecosystems of relationship.

And so today and next Sunday, Peter and I are going to look at one aspect of this whole: "Heart." And other preachers until Lent will help us think about what it might mean to engage our soul, strength, mind, others, and self. I am looking forward to what is going to come out of this.

So that brings me to ask, what do we mean when we say "heart" in this context? We sort of know what it means but when you try to pin it down, it becomes a little bit fuzzy.

Is it feelings? Yes and no. Is it love? Yes and no. Is it the core of our being? Yes and no. What about the other parts?  
Do you see how this can turn into a whole series?

"'Heart' occurs over one thousand times in the Bible, making it the most common term [about people] in the Scripture. It denotes a person's centre for both physical and emotional-intellectual-moral activities; sometimes it is used figuratively for any inaccessible thing."<sup>2</sup>

We also use it a lot in our common speech as well.

Let's do a little experiment, here are a few expressions I thought of. What comes to mind for you? (*unmute or put in chat the ones that occur to you*)

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<sup>1</sup> <https://dailymeditationswithmatthewfox.org/2022/01/05/men-holding-spirituality-in-secret/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/heart/>

Broken heart

Heart to heart

Get to the heart of the matter

Didn't have the heart

*[Wholeheartedly, heartache, our heart songs, tugging at the heart strings, hard-hearted, heart's desire, home is where the heart is, decolonizing the heart]*

There are so many of them that makes defining it so much harder.

Then there's also "Bless your heart" which sounds like it's wonderful but is actually a bit of a dig.

And if you grew up in a Christian context like I did, there's the good old "Accept Jesus into your heart." As I child I remember wondering where on earth was this "heart" and what did that mean. We're not going to unpack that right now. There are just so many ways that we use heart.

In scripture we find the following gems — each one could probably become a sermon:

In the passage in Luke 3 which we just read, we heard about people questioning in their hearts whether John the Baptist was the awaited Messiah.

Jeremiah 17:9

The heart is devious above all else;

it is perverse—

who can understand it?

I will make a side comment on this one. This was quoted to me as a way of not trusting my gut feelings. And I feel that was a wrong teaching — what a loss that has been.

I Samuel 16:7

“for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.”

Matthew 12:33-34 33

“Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit.

34 You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. “

Ezekiel 36:26

“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.”

Are any of these stirring up memories from your past?

I'd like to land on this one.

Matthew 5:8

Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.

An author who translates from the Aramaic language (Neil Douglas-Klotz) envisions that this could be translated in a few different ways<sup>3</sup>:

Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.

“Aligned with the One are those whose lives radiate from a core of love; they shall see God everywhere.”

Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.

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<sup>3</sup> p. 62, Neil Douglas-Klotz, Prayers of the Cosmos: Reflections on the Original Meaning of Jesus's Words, Harper Collins Publishers, 1990

“Resisting corruption are those whose natural reaction is sympathy and friendship; they shall be illuminated by a flash of lightning: the Source of the soul’s movement in all creatures.”

It seems, then, that heart is something in us that is a primary interface, a main connection with God. In a weird non-anatomical way, heart is what helps us to “see” (perceive) and connect with God.

So “loving with all our heart” is about tending to our relationship with God; **opening our eyes to notice God’s loving presence already around us.** And it all starts with God. God is part of the equation, it’s not all effort on our part.

One of the main things we can do is to remember who God — the source of love and life in the universe is, and how God sees us. How does God regard us, you ask?

Let’s look at what happened at Jesus’ baptism. Jesus began his ministry at his baptism. He wasn’t the only one there, there were many others who were pressing a reset button on their lives through baptism. He was turning to God and to his calling in that act, and God responded to him with affirmation: “You are my beloved.” Before he had ever done anything in his ministry: “You are my beloved.” — And also did that cool thing with the dove. It was a message of affirmation.

As you are comfortable, close your eyes and imagine for a moment, in your heart if you will, hearing these words: You are my beloved. Take a deep breath, and maybe try to fill in your name and hear “you are my beloved.” That is God’s Spirit tending to you.

Another way of loving God with all our hearts, is to **turn to God in some form of prayer.**

I don't know about you, but when I was growing up (and still to this day to a certain extent), there were a lot of expectations about what a good prayer life would look like. Lots of guilt and a sense of duty about "true" prayer happening at 5 am. Now, I am not a morning person and a relationship that would require me to be one is not a relationship that I would be able to sustain for very long!

Nowadays the pressure can be about how long to meditate, how many deep breaths to take, etc. We always set up expectations about what prayer should look like.

Over the years I've tried many different prayer practices, and they each seem effective in their own ways and in their own time. I have several books I can lend you, if you're interested in changing up your prayer practice. There are a lot of good ideas and good practices we can engage in. They are all valid. Just like you have different ways of being friends with people, there are different ways of being in relationship with God.

There is no one right way to pray. Jesus had to get away from people and spend lots of time on his own. Which seemed to be in the middle of the night sometimes. Or 40 days at the beginning of his ministry. The ways to pray are as varied as are the ways to have relationships. Some people need to text each other every day to feel connected. Some people need to check in once in a while, some people need words, some people need silence. Some people need breath, music, nature. When it comes to prayer, you do you.

Mauricio recently recommended a book called *Learning to Pray*, by James Martin. In it, the author tells of Thérèse of Lisieux.

She was a Carmelite nun who lived in the late 1800's and is considered by some to be a saint. She said:

“For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy.”

“The spirituality of Saint Thérèse is often called the “Little Way” for several reasons, chief among them is its emphasis on doing small things with great love for God... She often said that although she couldn't be a great Saint she could do little things.” I would say that is true of each of us as well.

Saint Thérèse understood prayer as coming from the heart, and emphasized the place of love in a life of prayer. “Her own description of prayer – surge of the heart – sounds like something we cannot avoid an almost unconscious act. Our hearts cry out, reach out search for God. It rings true for many of us. We *have* to pray we have to pour out our hearts, our very souls to God.”

In her understanding prayer is directed toward God. Prayer is a “cry of recognition” and the [heart] sees someone it recognizes. This alludes to the fact that we have a natural desire for God. Our [hearts] recognize God because they are created by God. Thérèse's friendship with Jesus was the most intimate relationship she had. She told him everything in prayer, both her trials and her joys.

Just like the glowing heart I told you about at the start, I'd really love if we could fix the current state of affairs with a quick call to the manufacturer and a couple of replacement parts. Unfortunately it's not quite that simple. By the way, if you are doing just fine right now, please hold those who are not in prayer.

I invite you this week to tend to your inner being, to love God with all your heart, however you can muster. Find the little things you can do to reboot your prayer life — whatever that looks like for you (finding an app or a book to guide you, reading the psalms, taking intentional deep breaths outside, gathering with others, having a conversation with Jesus). Our hearts are tender, they can't take many more demands right now. But even in our

state of covid exhaustion, we can find the small things: coming to worship together (you did that today, it's wonderful to have you here), the turn to the other, the moment of gratitude, kindness towards yourself, the extra rest — that will connect us with God when we most need it.

And above all, of course, know that you are beloved by the One who gives you breath, that God's Spirit rests upon you, and upon us, as it always has.

May God Bless your hearts — and I mean that in a good way.