

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from October 21, 2007

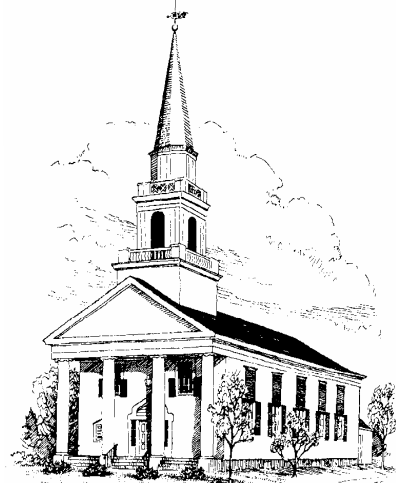
Rev. Barbara J. Libby

“What’s On Our Heart?”

Scriptures:

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Luke 18:1-8



Do you recall a time when you learned something “by heart?” It might have been early in your school years when you learned the alphabet, the pledge of allegiance, the multiplication tables, the Gettysburg Address or any of a number of poems by Robert Frost—perhaps “stopping by woods on a snowy evening” or “the road less traveled”.

Perhaps you can recall those things you learned “by heart” at home with your family—nursery rhymes, Dr. Seuss books, bedtime lullabies, or a special grace before the meal at the dinner table.

Perhaps you can recall learning “by heart” things at church or church school—the Lord’s Prayer, the 23rd psalm, the Doxology, the Gloria Patri. How about those hymns that we learned—almost by osmosis, without really even realizing we were doing it? Hymns do seem to be one of those things that go way back in our memories. We seem to remember the tunes particularly down through the years, whether we’ve sung them recently or not.

Did you ever wonder just how many different things we know “by heart?” We use that term “by heart” to indicate things we learned by rote or repetition—things we learned by repeating them over and over again, until they become so deeply ingrained in us that they do become part of us, a part of us deep within somewhere, so deep within us that we might even say they are written on our hearts.

The prophet Jeremiah suggests to the Israelites who are living in exile in Babylon that God intends not only to return them to their native land but also to offer them a new covenant, a covenant written on their hearts. God promises the people a new covenant that would go with them wherever they went and one that would be with them always. This was a promise of a covenant that could never be lost or stolen. This was a promise of a covenant that could never be forgotten or misplaced. This was the promise of a covenant that would be within each of them throughout their lives, a covenant written on their hearts.

As I mentioned in my introduction to the reading, the Hebrews did believe that the heart was the locus of the will and the intellect. They believed that the heart was the most powerful and important organ in the entire human body. They believed that the heart housed the very spirit of a human being. So, if God was going to write a new covenant on our hearts, in ancient thinking, God was going to mark us in some amazing way at the very center of our spirits, at our heart. (Interestingly enough, when we say we learn things “by heart”, we really still seem to acknowledge that there is a center of us that somehow retains that ancient image of being some sort of container at our very core.)

As we move through biblical texts from both the Old and the New Testaments, we are met with language that speaks repeatedly of “the heart”—we are invited to open our hearts; many of the psalms plead with God for “a clean heart” (*Psalms 51*); other verses ask God to put “a new heart and loving spirit” within us. Over and over again in various ways, biblical texts invite us to open our lives to new possibilities, to change, and to new ways of doing and being.

This notion of a new heart for the ancient peoples pointed to their understanding that sometimes we need a complete change of heart or transformation to become a better or a renewed person. Sometimes we come to God asking for a completely clean slate on which to start over again. Sometimes in our weekly worship liturgy we make a prayer of confession. We offer up our mistakes and our failures, we acknowledge our sin, and we ask God to forgive us, to wipe the slate clean for us.

The assurance of pardon that follows that ritual confession reminds us that God’s grace can and does cleanse us from those mistakes and sins. The assurance of pardon reminds us that God’s mercy is there for us always and that God’s love renews our hearts at the very core of our being. The assurance of pardon after a prayer of confession assures us that God offers us a “clean heart” if we will only approach God with true repentance and seek God’s forgiveness. “Reflection, self-examination, honesty, and trust are necessary in order to open our hearts to God, who waits to ‘put a right spirit within us.’” (*Elizabeth J. Canham, “Homecoming,” Weavings Magazine, p. 11, March/April 1995*)

Do you ever think about your faith in Jesus Christ as a gift from God? Do you ever consider that God has written a covenant on your heart?

We know that God did offer us a new covenant with the arrival of his son, Jesus. We think of Jesus as an offering from God, a personified covenant, if you will, not written on stone tablets or in the sky but a unique gift from God. Jesus Christ was a gift from God that could not be broken or destroyed. In Jesus Christ, God did provide us with a new covenant. With the gift of Jesus Christ, we were given a unique chance to start over, a chance to begin again with a new covenant.

Our Christian faith suggests that it is Jesus who came to this earth to be the new covenant for all of us. It is by his life, death and resurrection that we can seek a whole new way of being. God continually invites us back into relationship. Our task is to be about renewing and sustaining our relationship with God.

By faith we believe that God can reshape us and renew us from the depths of our being, at our very core. By faith we trust that God can re-create us, put new hearts in us when we are ready to accept God’s loving and forgiving care. We perhaps continue to struggle to make sense of the strange paradox that God’s son came to this earth, to live among us and to die on a cross for us, so that we might be gifted the promise of eternal life.

It is a strange and confusing paradox that we are each brought to new life by Jesus’ death on a cross. One of the strange paradoxes of our lives is that something must die in our lives for something new to be born. Any gardener knows without a doubt that the old growth has to be pruned away so that new growth and new life can emerge. What is the old growth in us that needs pruning? What will it take to renew our hearts? What hard choices will need to be made in our lives to make us ready for God’s new spirit in us?

As a congregation in an interim time, as a community of faith in an in-between time, what are some things that must die here so that new things can be born? What is the old growth here at Mystic Congregational Church that needs pruning so that something new can happen here? This transitional

time for Mystic Congregational Church offers this congregation a unique opportunity for pruning, for renewing, and for preparing for the future.

In the midst of this, the fall Stewardship Campaign with its theme “Moving Forward Together” also reminds us that we are preparing here for the future by working together and by keeping our forward momentum going.

As many of us know from personal experience, it is sometimes out of our darkest hour that new hope can arise. It is sometimes walking through the pain and suffering that life brings us that opens us to a place of new opportunity and a “change of heart” full of hope and promise. Our faith story gives us strength that, sometimes, from great trials, from great pain, and even from great suffering, comes great promise, new life and new beginnings.

We gather here each week to remember the paradox of our faith, that by his death Jesus brought us new life. Let us each ask ourselves this day, “What’s on our heart this day?” Let us each listen carefully for where God is calling us to go—as individuals and as a congregation—as we move forward together into the future.

Let us keep our hearts open to God’s loving spirit. Amen.

