

Homily – The Way of the Heart

Rob Keim

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It is good to be back with you today. I had a good three weeks off for my mini sabbatical. I exercised each day though two hours on the elliptical machine exhausted me. There were many days that I got to do tree work and brush clearing, but not on those days that were over one hundred degrees. And, I got to do a lot of reading for the online wisdom school class that I am taking. I read three books by the instructor of the class, Cynthia Bourgeault. The first is “The Wisdom Way of Knowing: Reclaiming an Ancient Tradition to Awaken the Heart.” This is an excellent book and I highly recommend it. The second book is “The Meaning of Mary Magdalene: Discovering the Woman at the Heart of Christianity,” and this book stretched me to think about things in new ways. The third book is “The Heart of Centering Prayer,” and this book is quite good but very dense. I also read the new book by our Episcopal Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, called “The Way of Love: Holding Onto Hope in Troubled Times.” This is also an excellent book and I highly recommend it, and I think there is a lot of good stuff in this book about our elections and their aftermath.

By the way at least here in California there is still time to register to vote. Election day is only nine days away. Please vote and make your voice heard in a way that you think is consistent with God and God’s love. There is also still time to make your reservation for next Sunday’s drive-thru BBQ. When you come to pick up your food, you can drop off your 2021 pledge card, drop off a donation for the Food Bank, and pick up this nifty “I’m an Episcopalian and I Voted!” sticker. I know you want one of these. But, back to my sabbatical.

The time off was wonderful and I tried to balance across the three-fold way of knowing. You may recall, that before my time off I had started to preach about one of the main topics of my online Wisdom School. The three-fold way of knowing is living into the way that God has created us. We know things with our minds or thinking center, we know things with our bodies or moving center, and we know things as we relate and connect through our heart center. And, it is this third way of knowing that I want to focus today, the heart center.

The way of the heart begins in the heart of Christ moves into the heart of humanity, and then circles back into the heart of Christ. There is this flow of the heart or this movement of love that circles back and forth between Christ and creation. Heart, and movement, and flow, and love are swirling all around us if we just step into it and feel the connection that is already embracing us.

This is the flow and connection that Jesus is referencing in today's Gospel reading, which is also known as "the Great Commandment." "He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." Love God, love others and love self, and to this I usually add "and love the rest of non-human creation." Every word of the Bible is read through this prism of love. Every action of God is through this filter of love. Every person and part of creation is translated into love. God first loves us, and through God's love we respond by loving God back, by loving others, and by loving ourselves. However, for centuries we have layered in so many things of the head that have nothing to do with God. So, how do we get back to a very Christian heart centered way of knowing?

To start out, I think the first thing we would say to reclaim the tradition of the heart is to recognize where we have gone astray in our thinking of the heart. Over the years we have come to think of the heart as the seat of our personal emotional life. Thus, the heart has become the place of sentimentality, drama, and passion. However, this is not the true function of the heart. As we are going to see, these are all the things that diverted and distorted the heart from its true function. Let me explain.

When you start out by the modern parlances of, "he's in his head, but she's in her heart"—and by this we mean effusive affectivity and maybe some sort of intuitiveness, with this way of thinking, we are starting on the wrong foot, and we are going to give ourselves a hard time. I have to laugh that the sentimental functions that the modern Western world ascribes to the heart, in ancient times, these functions used to be ascribed a little lower than the heart to the liver. Can you see the Valentine's Day cards about the liver. "My liver pines for you." Or, "Won't you be my liver lover?" Or how about, I liver New York. You get the drift. Let the lower functions take care of drama and turbidity, and let's reclaim the heart for a better purpose.

What has classically been understood by the heart is that the heart is an organ of spiritual perception. Its function is to see, and to see through the prism of love. But, not the sentimental love and drama of the liver.

The reclaimed heart is to see things that are physically invisible to the senses alone, or to the rational and intuitive mind. It sees the picture. It aligns with the depth dimension of life. It corresponds to the turf that the church has traditionally called "faith," but we've lost the meaning of that term, too. We consider faith nowadays more or less to be, believing things that are manifestly ridiculous and counterintuitive, and doing this at the expense of our reason. Faith doesn't mean that. It doesn't mean leaping into the dark. It means, in a mysterious way, seeing in the

dark, because the heart, like a little homing beacon, can align with what is not only a golden, invisible thread running through this whole mess, but your golden, invisible thread. The path that you are being drawn along, the heart reads it. If you think I'm just bringing in something that doesn't really belong to our Bible tradition as you know it, I submit for your consideration, "Blessed are the poor in heart, or pure in heart, for they shall see God."

Jesus comes out of this lineage that understands the heart as an organ of spiritual sight, of spiritual clarity, luminosity, clairvoyance that not only lights up the invisible, but brings that light into dialogue with this planet, so that we see the two together. We see what goes on in this world, in the light of that luminosity.

With our heart center we are able to match pattern, see coherence, and respond to it. We are able to relate and connect. Furthermore, I would say that what we call conscience is simply that same heart capacity operating in the moral sphere. We see the whole, we sense the whole, and then we understand what has to be done for there to be right action, irrespective of our own personal stake in the matter. This is a great foundation for voting.

Though these faculties of the heart center are many, we give them a single name when they are operating best and that is "love". And, we hold our breath before those liminal moments when all these separately formed hearts form one heart, and it isn't just individual and private, but we touch the common heart of all humanity in our own yearning. This is the kind of heart we are talking about. I think the single biggest mission for Christianity in the 21st century is to re-engage the moving and heart centers so that they can come alongside our very adept head center. This is the path that Jesus shows us as he leads us back to himself.

Now, I have been using the head center to try to teach about the heart center. This does not always work. Some of the best training for the heart center is from the arts and music, so let me end today with poem by Edwina Gateley called "Let Your God Love You."

"Be silent. Be still. Alone. Empty
 Before your God. Say nothing. Ask nothing. Be silent. Be still. Let your God look upon
 you. That is all. God knows. God understands. God loves you
 With an enormous love, And only wants
 To look upon you
 With that love. Quiet. Still. Be.
 Let your God—Love you."

Parts of this sermon are based on or taken from a lecture by Cynthia Bourgeault on "The Way of the Heart."