

“At the Heart of It”
Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 12, 2012 – The Rev. Torrence Harman
2 Kings 5:1-14; Psalm 30; 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Mark 1:40-45

February 14, two days from now, is Valentine’s Day. It’s a heart shaped day. And yet few realize its origins.

It was originally a Saint’s day (St. Valentine’s Day) established by Pope Gelasius I in 496 A.D. It recognized several saints named Valentinus: Valentinus of Terni, a priest who became a bishop about 196 A.D. and was later martyred; Valentinus of Rome, a priest martyred about 269 A.D.; and a Valentinus martyred in Africa about whom little is known.

Although stories developed much later which may have linked them to romantic love, there is little to support such a connection that would lead to the frilly, cupid adorned, heart shaped cards we now call Valentines. This “Saints” Day seemed to have been hijacked for romantic love when Chaucer wrote a poem in 1382 to honor the first anniversary of the engagement of King Richard II of England to Anne of Bohemia, two fifteen year olds who had been married earlier that year. “For this was St. Valentine’s Day” . . . was the reference to the engagement and so St. Valentine’s Day became associated with romantic love, further affirmed so in later literature by Ophelia in Shakespeare’s Hamlet, and by the English poet John Donne. This “Saints” day was deleted from the General Roman Calendar of Saints in 1969 by Pope Paul VI.

Despite the Valentine’s Day image of the heart as the seat of romantic love, the heart has a much more comprehensive and complicated role to play in our lives. Laying aside how it works physically in our systems – pumping blood – ancient people assigned great significance to the heart and the role it played in living life.

To the ancient Hebrews the heart was the seat not only of emotions but also at the center of all thought. Whereas we might separate out mind and heart, assigning mind work to the brain, the ancients didn’t. Ancient Egyptians considered the heart as the essential organ. When embalming their dead, they threw out the brains, but carefully kept the heart. Whether one was allowed to pass over the river of death depended on a weighing of the heart on a set of scales against a feather.

The importance of the heart as being the center of a person, still holds today, despite our contemporary emphasis on the brain which we associate with the mind. It is as if we understand in some almost unconscious way that our hearts play a significant role in moving us to do things or not. They are, to use a familiar phrase, “What makes us tic.” Even considering the importance of “will” – forming the intent to do something – we somehow recognize that it takes the involvement of our heart to make whatever we “will” to happen.

You’re probably wondering at this point if I’m ever going to get to at least one of our Scripture readings for today – because I always do, however circuitous my route to get there.

So here is where this is all headed.

“Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched (the leper) and said to him, “I do choose. Be made clean!”

“Moved” is an amazing word in this passage. What moved? How? Why?

This movement is a major turning point in the passage. It is the moment, the movement that happened at the still center point between leprosy and cleanness, between illness and health, between isolation and restoration to community, between diminishment and renewal.

It is maybe what happened inside the Good Samaritan and not the others who passed by the man in a ditch beside the road in that Gospel parable told by Jesus.

Something “moved” in Jesus. What happened next was a reaching out. What also happened was Jesus’ words “I do choose . . . to make you clean.” This last part can be troubling if we take it to heart and wonder, “But suppose Jesus doesn’t choose to help me?”

But let’s look at those words a different way. They signify “will.” Here Jesus is offering us a special look at a process that too often is completely unconscious for most of us. Consider that, when moved, we have a choice of what to do when that turning point presents itself.

“I do choose,” Jesus says. The gift for us is Jesus’ showing us the importance of choice and will, the process towards forming the intention to do something creative, something life giving.

Jesus was a Hebrew. We consider his actions as rooted in the Hebrew mind set. The heart was the seat of both emotions and “mind-set.” What we see in this morning’s Gospel – in its “good news” – is an integration of emotions and will that combined to “move” Jesus to heal the leper.

When have you felt your heart move in some way and what happens when it does? People refer to this all the time. Think of the following phrases that are so familiar in our culture. Consider how in some way they are examples of the idea that when our hearts are “touched” things happen.

I was moved to tears.
My heart sank.
With all my heart, I . . .
My heart skipped a beat when
I followed my heart.
My heart was heavy when
My heart was filled with joy when . . .
I was broken-hearted when
My heart is full of joy . . .
My heart goes out to

It was a heart stopping moment when

Some of you may remember the singer Whitney Houston. She was a remarkable artist, a singer with a soaring voice and passion. This morning when I turned on my computer, I glanced at the article about her death at age 48, a real shock for many. What caught my eye were the comments of so many of her artist comrades – other performers. It was clear that they were shocked, saddened and moved. Among the comments:

“My heart is weeping”

I am heartbroken”

My heart goes out to the family in their time of distress“

I believe that the heart is a source of great and amazing energy. When our hearts are moved, individually and/or collectively as in a group, there is an energy that arises out of that movement. That energy is neutral but powerful. It is what we do with that energy that matters.

What stirs our hearts may be something we label “good” (pity, compassion, love, joy) or what we might label “bad” (jealousy, pride, anger, revenge) but whatever aroused the energy, we have a choice of how to use that energy.

I love to use the example of the mother whose child was killed by a drunk driver. My guess is that all sorts of things “moved” her heart at that time and in the aftermath of the tragedy. And yet, she used the powerful energy that arose within her to start what became a national cause, a national movement: MADD, Mothers against Drunk Driving. Only God knows how many lives were saved by the work of that organization.

“Moved” Jesus stretched out his hand and touched the leper. At that touch the leper was not yet healed. “I choose to make you clean. Be made clean!” And then it happened. He was healed. Two things happened here. Jesus’ heart was moved. And then he chose what to do with the powerful energy that was moving through him. His choice was life giving.

In the days ahead, let’s all get in touch with our hearts. May we be heart-aware. May we feel our heart move. May we feel the energy rise within us as our heart is moved. May we consider how to use that energy. And then choose. May we choose, as individuals and as we gather together. May we choose to use that God given energy for that which is life giving.

Feel your heart move and rejoice that God is giving you the opportunity to be part of the healing of the world. You can be part of the healing of yourself, your family, your neighborhood, your community, the whole world. It starts at the door of your heart. Open your heart and become what is life-giving.