“Of Hearts and Heartbreak”

February 9, 2020

The First Parish in Lincoln

Rev. Jenny M. Rankin

Readings: Excerpts from Psalms 22, 27, 51; Ezekiel 18, 36; reading from Professor Kimberly Patton, Harvard Divinity School (attached at end of sermon)

I’ve been enjoying teaching Spiritual Autobiography these last few weeks;

Listening to your stories about growing up has made me think of my own.

My grandmother, Helen Arnold, was an eclectic woman

Her main public role was that of a minister’s wife

(Unpaid, of course! yes that was a thing in those days)

Working alongside my grandfather throughout his 35 years as a Unitarian minister in a small church in West Roxbury.

She arranged flowers for the altar, had people to tea, and wrote notes.

But that wasn’t all. She raised four children, became an award-winning horticulturalist, an accomplished woodworker and a scholar of Emily Dickinson and the Bronte sisters.

One of her many projects was “An Emily Dickinson Year Book” with one poem for each day of the year

For my grandfather’s birthday in February, she chose:

“If I can stop one heart from breaking,

I shall not live in vain. . . .

Or help one fainting robin

Unto his nest again . . . . “

Well of course no minister, or any other person, can stop another’s heart from breaking but I think she was trying to lift up what she saw in him as he ministered amongst his flock at that little church

He couldn’t prevent heartbreak but at least he could be there, alongside his people, when it came to them.

He wasn’t a famous preacher (or by my uncle’s account, an especially good one!)

But he was faithful, tending to the hearts of those in his care, visiting, listening

He wasn’t perfect, he was human, he made mistakes,

But he stuck with it and they with him.

When he retired, they gave him a cream colored quilt with the name of each parishioner embroidered in green thread.

I have it still, tucked away in a trunk, one of those things you don’t quite know what to do with but can’t bear to throw out—

I’m not entirely sure why I keep it but can’t seem to let it go.

To me, it’s a symbol of the kind of minister he was AND the kind of congregation they were.

Hearts and heartbreak lie right at the heart of ministry because they lie right at the heart of life

*How* we love, *who* we love*, if* we can love, *when* we can love, when we *can’t*

How love aids us, redeems us, shapes us, wrecks us,

It’s all the stuff of life and that’s what ministry is all about.

Perhaps that’s why a book with “heart” in the title jumped out at me this week. It was *The Heart of Christianity, Rediscovering A Life of Faith* by Marcus Borg, a scholar who was a leading light in the Historical Jesus seminar.

The line that caught my eye: the word “heart” appears over 1000 times in the Bible[[1]](#footnote-1)

According to Borg, the Biblical meaning is more about our inner self, our true self.

In Greek the word for heart is “kardia,” and means “the center and seat of spiritual life,” according to one scholar, “it is the fountain and seat of the thoughts, passions, desires, appetites, affections, purposes, endeavors"

In Hebrew, the word for heart is “lebab” and connotes mind, will, emotions.

“The heart is the center of the being, where the will, affections, thoughts, purposes and imagination reside.”

In both languages it is a word that refers to a person’s whole inner life—who the person really is.

In the Bible, Borg tells me, hearts are either “closed” (turned away from God) or “open” (turned towards God).

The “normal” human condition is to have a “closed” heart with the point of a spiritual life to try to get it cracked open a little.[[2]](#footnote-2)

A human being with a closed heart is disconnected from the divine

And so, separated from both God and self,

Lacks gratitude, can’t see new possibilities,

Is closed in on its self—-self-centered

Struggles to feel a sense of wonder or awe

Lacks true compassion.

In short, when we find ourselves being judgmental, wrapped up in our own affairs, not given to wonder, disconnected from others, numb or cynical in the face of suffering—

In the Biblical world view that would indicate a “closed” heart.[[3]](#footnote-3)

On the other hand, when we are able to experience gratitude, have a sense of wonder at being awake and alive, feel a sense of connection, belonging,

That’s an “open heart.”

When our hearts are “open” we are able to be compassionate at a deeper level—

We see in the homeless man or woman on the street not a stranger,

Someone radically “other” than us, but a real person with a story of their own

Someone who was born and grew up and had a childhood as we did,

And, through some combination of circumstance, genetics, events, mental illness, addiction, is now the person at the intersection on Route 2 with the cardboard sign asking for spare change.

Or the person we serve dinner to at Pine Street Inn on a Monday night.

When our hearts are “closed” in the Biblical sense, we see that person as separate from us—

When our hearts are open, we see that person and think “there but for the grace of God” go I or a member of my family.

In Concord where I live, an eighteen-year-old boy committed suicide last week. Driving home from the library yesterday, I see the flowers placed on the train track. There have been three “suicides by train” in the last few years.

When our hearts are more “closed” we might look at a family where there has been a suicide, and have some judgement, thinking “well, there is probably something going on in that family, some contributing factors; and that would never happen in my family.” When our hearts are more “open” we feel no judgment just compassion because we know, deep inside, that “there but for the grace of God go I” and the people I love.

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Opening ourselves to others is an act of courage*—“courage”* from the French which literally means “heart.”

But it is not without the risk of heartbreak.

Sometimes we may think of the word “heartbreak” only in the great *big* sense

The first love who broke your heart

The heartbreak of losing a father at 14 or a child at any age

But heartbreak comes in all shapes and forms

Large and small

For some Americans, this week held heartbreak

(For others it held elation)

There is heartbreak over the state of the earth

One of you wrote to me this week about being at the border in Arizona a few years ago, standing right in the place where volunteers had brought water, and people had died

“It was heartbreaking to see clothes and other items in the cacti, and imagine people on their perilous journeys.”

If we are human and if we dare to open our hearts

Then we’ll have hearts that beat and break,

Beat and break.

It’s not something that happens once and for all

But in big or small ways it can happen again and again

“Heartbreak,” writes the poet David Whyte, “is unpreventable,”

“The natural outcome of caring for people and things

Over which we have no control . . . .”[[4]](#footnote-4)

“Heartbreak is how we mature;

Yet we use the word *heartbreak* as if it only occurs

When things have gone wrong: an unrequited love, a shattered dream, a child lost before their time.

“Heartbreak, we hope, is something we hope we can avoid;

Something to guard against,

A chasm to be carefully looked for and then walked around;

The hope,” he continues, “is to find a way to place our feet” in such a way as to “keep us from the losses all other human beings have experienced . . . .

Since the beginning of …. time.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

That’s impossible, of course, we *know* we cannot tiptoe around the chasms and avoid the heartbreak but it’s only human to hope that it doesn’t come calling at our door.

Instead, we come to know over time, over the course of a lifetime, that heartbreak is the very essence of being human. Of being, as Whyte tells us, “on the journey from here to there and of coming to care deeply for what we find along the way.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

There is a part of me that knows this but I like to hear his words.

They comfort me somehow.

This week I heard someone describe how they were walking with a group in the high green hills of Ireland when a sudden storm came down.

Lightning bolts all around them.

They ducked and ran and found cover near a fresh water spring.

Sometimes, I confess, I’m tempted to play the game of life like that

As if heartbreak were a lightning bolt coming down out of the sky

And if I run fast enough or far enough I can out run it

Or if I find a cave and shut myself in

The temptation can be to wall ourselves away

Put up a shell

Try to go to a place where love can’t get in

If we don’t give our hearts away then they can’t be broken

I’ve done that myself in my life I admit

Trying to shield myself from heartbreak

But at what cost

Shutting ourselves away from pain means of course shutting ourselves away from life itself. From love, from joy.

And so I’ve tried to move on from the notion of heartbreak coming as a kind of sudden “visitation” like a lightning bolt,

And think of it instead more as an intrinsic part of the path I walk—

The price and peril and beauty of being human—

The cost of loving and being loved in return.

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It is February and I’m musing on hearts, open and closed

On being whole-hearted, lion-hearted, tender of heart, brave of heart

I’m thinking of my grandparents and Emily Dickinson, “If I can stop one heart from breaking….”

I’m thinking about the heart of our nation.

I’m thinking about the heart of this community, one year after Manish’ video.

But most of all I’m thinking about *your* hearts

Your hearts as parents or grandparents

Concerned about the mental and physical health of children whether young or grown

Your hearts—

Deeply worried about a country where you’ve lived all your life, that you’ve served in one way or another

Our hearts

What do they hold today?

How can we listen to each other’s hearts?

How can we hold gently together whatever is there to be held

Because that’s one reason I think we come here, to try and do that, for one another

We bring our hearts here each Sunday and all that they hold

And even though we may not speak any words out loud

In silence

In song

We try to hold one another’s hearts—

Tend to them—

*Attend* to them—

It is a gentle and a sacred and a healing thing we do.

I am grateful for this heart-holding, heart-healing place.

*Reading:*

*“The religious imagination*

*Reveals the broken heart*

*As the very best means to wisdom and growth,*

*Even when it disrupts the dreams and goals that have inspired us, even when it overshadows the CVs (resumes) we craft*

*Or the faces we publicly present;*

*Even when it scatters the ducks*

*We have so carefully lined up in a row.*

*If we are associated with Harvard in any way,*

*We have learned in our various ways*

*To marshal these glossy ducks in tight formation,*

*And to keep them waddling under strategic control.”*

*There have been or will be*

*Times in all of our lives when the ducks will not line up.*

*They scatter and squawk,*

*Or they are devoured by a starving coyote.*

*Far from being distractions,*

*These times of apparent anarchy*

*Are the most important times in our lives,*

*And again, this is an ancient idea.*

*For it is highly likely*

*That during such broken-hearted,*

*disorienting times,*

*Illusions will shatter,*

*Old ideas and attachments will be burned up. . . .*

*Old ways of being will dissolve . . . .*

*And the one thing or person or way of life*

*We thought we could not live without*

*Will be taken from us.*

*These are times*

*When we will learn compassion*

*What in Buddhism is called boddicitta,*

*The awakened heart,*

*Times when the unbearably wounded*

*Will themselves emerge as healers.”*

*My students say to me sometimes, as they apply to doctoral programs or jobs in parish ministry. “How shall I account for the two, or the ten, missing years on my resume? How should I explain the gap?”*

*And how I wish I could always answer them, “tell the truth. Say,*

*“I took in a child whose mother was in prison and sang her to sleep every night while she cried. I worked the night shift in a rifle factory. I battled an addiction and I won. My husband was crushed by a boulder that fell in our own backyard and I tended his grave. I worked as a stripper to save money to go to graduate school. My marriage made in heaven turned to hell. I fled to Caledonia. I fled to Paraguay. . . . . I swapped dirty needles for clean, I took photos of skulls left by the Khmer rouge. I cut down trees all day and made them into tables.*

*These are all true stories of the things my students have done during the “gaps” in their resumes.*

*These experiences are how hearts are broken and re-made; how souls are forged; how we become human beings with credible beliefs about existence itself.*

*The gaps on the resume are the abysses into which we fall from time to time and in the process fall into the hands of the loving god. The gaps are when the initiations take place.”*

*(Kimberly Patton is the Professor of Comparative and Historical Study of Religion at Harvard Divinity School).*

1. Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity, Rediscovering A Life of Faith* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), p. 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid, 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid, 152-153. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. David Whyte, *Consolations.* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)