

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario

Sunday, March 4, 2018

The Rev. Dr. David Thompson

“A Beautiful Heart!”

“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart.”

“Thus saith our God. If with all your heart ye truly seek Me, Ye shall ever surely find Me, Thus saith our God.”

Alan Cohen writes: “All the accolades of the outside world are meaningless if your heart is empty.”

A mechanic was removing a cylinder head from the motor of a Ferrari, when he spotted the owner, a world-famous heart surgeon. The heart surgeon was waiting for the service to be complete. The mechanic shouted across the garage, “Hey Doc can I ask you a question?” The famous surgeon, a bit surprised, walked over to the mechanic working on the Ferrari. The mechanic straightened up, wiped his hands on a rag and asked, “So Doc, look at this engine. I also can open it up, take valves out, fix’em, put in new parts and when I finish this will work just like new. So how come I get a pittance and you get the really big money, when you and I are doing basically the same work?” The surgeon paused, smiled and leaned over, and whispered to the mechanic, “Try doing it while it’s running.”

In the Hebrew Biblical tradition, the heart is much more than a mechanical pump. It is the center of integration of the human being. It is a sophisticated computer where we love, where we feel things, where we have intention, where we have imagination and motivation. The Bible teaches us that if our hearts are not spiritually healthy everything else begins to fall apart. It is vital that we care for our hearts! For the Scripture says that the Lord of all creation does not look upon the outward appearance but upon our heart. WE are to love the Lord with all of our heart. Loving God only in our heads just won’t do!

It is all fine to talk about what to do on a Sunday with our hearts and sing hymns about heart purity, but sometimes Monday morning on the job comes hard with a dose of reality therapy. Our heart comes into conflict with what is asked for. Sometimes we are forced by our job to make decisions that go against our hearts in order to stay employed. I knew one pastor who was asked by her personnel committee to fire an employee who was drinking on the job. She had found out that this woman was drinking at lunch time. During the morning she delivered great work but during the afternoons the work deteriorated. The pastor suspecting her noontime drink took an opportunity to test the drink and discovered that sure enough it was strongly alcoholic. It was the pastor’s duty to report to the personnel department, who said immediately that she should be terminated.

By the time of the personnel meeting the employee was in the intensive care unit of the hospital with alcohol poisoning. The head of personnel said that for the good of the church she must be told, even while in the intensive care unit, that she was terminated. That way the church could get on with hiring someone else. The pastor could not do that, thinking it was unethical and most unwise to upset the employee further and perhaps send her over the edge. But personnel insisted. The pastor refused. Personnel reported to the next level up that the pastor had “confused her role as head of staff with pastoral care and that this was cause for discipline or termination of the pastor because the pastor was insubordinate.” What would you have done? The pastor, God bless her, chose to follow her heart.

The same sort of drama played out on the international stage at St. Paul's Cathedral in England in October of 2011. The Occupy Wall Street Movement had spawned a group that met outside St. Paul's Cathedral, taking up the space at the entrance with their tent city. The City of London insisted that St. Paul's evict the protestors for health and safety concerns.

Dr. Giles Fraser, the then Canon Chancellor, was in sympathy with the aims of the protestors and supportive. But pressure was put upon him by the city and he resigned. The protestors said he was an honorable man - his heart cost him his job. He couldn't in good heart evict them, even although St. Paul's lost about 20,000 pounds sterling every day that it was closed.

The Dean, Graeme Knowles, also resigned after pleading with the protestors to leave. Supportive of their aims but also concerned about access for fire trucks and other safety concerns and also trying to do the will of the city and Cathedral chapter, he too resigned after St. Paul's was closed for the first time since the Second World War.

Both men knew that the conscience is central to the heart. Somehow even at the top of their field in very influential positions they felt compelled to listen to their hearts. Thanks be to God they did listen to their own hearts. But the price was very high. Both men loved their jobs and lost them.

Blaise Pascal in his *pensees* once wrote: "Le cœur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point," or The heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of.

Two little boys were talking about growing up and one said that he did not want to grow up because when you grow up your heart dies. I wonder if that does not just happen to little boys?

Jesus said about the integrity of the heart "What will a man gain by winning the whole world at the cost of his true self? ...Whoever cares for his own safety is lost, but if a man will let himself be lost for my sake, that man is safe!"

On the internet there is a site for broken hearts. The stories there are sad. They are stories of lost love, broken promises, breaches of trust and romantic love totally out of control, so much so that the people suffering heart break are suicidal when they lose the love of their hearts. Some commit suicide to deal with a broken heart.

In romantic love we also need to be careful about who we give our hearts to. Some times when we put our dreams into someone's basket we discover that there is a hole in their basket and our dreams slip away. The Bible tells us over and over again that there is a Great One to whom we can give our hearts for safe keeping.

I think that there is in all of us a God space in our hearts. Until that space is filled by God at our invitation we cannot get a bottom in our own basket. Only then do we become worthy of carrying the dreams of others in our hearts. That teaching is primary: It goes back to the central core of Christianity: "Love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength." Someone who does love God like this in my experience can be trusted with our love. For God cares like no one else for our hearts! And Jesus is often called the king of hearts. Our hearts also need to be able to respond to tragedy and stress. Memorizing uplifting Scripture for when we are in trouble can be very helpful indeed.

Bobby had lost all of his hair at the age of five with cancer treatments. He had experienced numerous painful procedures for his leukemia and today was another painful treatment. As the procedure began Bobby said to his doctor "Would it be alright if I said the 23rd psalm while you stick me?" "Of course, that would be fine" said his doctor and began the procedure. Bobby recited it beautifully, no tears, no movement and then the

brave little boy said: "Dr. that didn't hurt too much!" The doctor however, knew that it had hurt plenty! Then Bobby surprised him by asking whether he too could recite the twenty third psalm? "Well, I don't know" said the Doctor. "I think so." "Well, let's hear you!" said Bobby. So the doctor stumbled through it. All the other professionals were trying to disappear as they feared being called on next. Then Bobby said, "You know you really should learn the twenty third psalm by heart. Because when you say it out loud, God hears you and lets you know inside your heart that he is being strong for you when you can't be strong for yourself." Out of the mouths of babes and young children.

The passengers on the bus watched sympathetically as the attractive young woman with the white cane made her way carefully up the steps. She paid the driver and, using her hands to feel the location of the seats, walked down the aisle and found the seat he'd told her was empty.

It had been a year since Susan, thirty-four, became blind. Due to a medical misdiagnosis she had been rendered sightless, and she was suddenly thrown into a world of darkness, anger, frustration and self-pity.

Once a fiercely independent woman, Susan now felt condemned by this terrible twist of fate to become a powerless, helpless burden on everyone around her. "How could this have happened to me?" she would plead, her heart knotted with anger.

Mark was an Air Force officer and he loved Susan with all of his heart. When she first lost her sight, he watched her sink into despair and was determined to help his wife gain the strength and confidence she needed to become independent again. Mark's military background had trained him well to deal with sensitive situations, and yet he knew this was the most difficult battle he would ever face. He decided to face it with all the intelligence of his heart.

Finally, Susan felt ready to return to her job, but how would she get there? She used to take the bus, but was now too frightened to get around the city by herself. So, Mark volunteered to drive her to work each day, even though they worked at opposite ends of the city. At first, this comforted Susan and fulfilled Mark's need to protect his wife who was now so insecure about performing even the slightest task.

Soon, however Mark realized that this arrangement wasn't working - it was hectic, and costly. "Susan is going to have to start taking the bus again", he admitted to himself. But just the thought of mentioning it to her made his heart cringe. She was still so fragile, so angry. How would she react?

Just as Mark predicted, Susan was horrified at the idea of taking the bus again. "I'm blind!" she responded bitterly. "How am I supposed to know where I'm going? I feel like you're abandoning me."

Mark's heart broke to hear these words. But his heart directed him to do what he knew had to be done. He promised Susan that each morning and evening he would ride the bus with her, for as long as it took, until she got the hang of it.

And that is exactly what happened. For two solid weeks, Mark, military uniform and all, accompanied Susan to and from work each day. He taught her how to rely on her other senses, specifically her hearing, to determine where she was and how to adapt to her new environment.

He made her laugh, even on those not-so-good days when she would trip exiting the bus, or drop something and be unable to find it. Each morning they made the journey together, and Mark would take a cab back to his office. Although this routine was even

more costly and exhausting than the previous one, Mark's heart told him that it would be only a matter of time before Susan would be able to ride the bus by herself.

Finally, Susan decided that she was ready to try the trip on her own. Monday morning arrived, and before she left she threw her arms around Mark. Her eyes filled with tears of gratitude for his loyalty, his patience, his love. She said good-bye, and for the first time, they went their separate ways.

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday - each day on her own went perfectly, and Susan felt better each day as her confidence returned. She was doing it! She was going to work all by herself!

On Friday morning, Susan took the bus to work as usual. As she was about to exit the bus, the driver touched her shoulder and said, "Boy, I sure envy you." Curious, she asked the driver, "Why do you say that you envy me?" The driver responded, "It must feel so good to be taken care of and protected like you are. Susan had no idea what the driver was talking about, and asked again, "What do you mean?" The driver answered, "You know, every morning for the past week, a fine looking gentleman in a military uniform has been standing across the corner watching you when you get off the bus. He makes sure you cross the street safely and he watches you until you enter your office building. Then he blows you a kiss, and walks away. You are one lucky lady. Tears of gratitude poured down Susan's cheeks. She was lucky, for Mark had given her a gift even more powerful than sight, a gift she didn't need to see to believe - the gift of the love of his heart.

As Robert Tizon has said: "I would rather have eyes that cannot see; ears that cannot hear; lips that cannot speak, than a heart that cannot love."

Mark had a heart that chose to love even under the toughest circumstances. I think that the greatest thing we can ever aspire too is to have a beautiful compassionate heart. I think that was Jesus' greatest gift to the world! And I think that the only way for us to develop such a beautiful heart is to love the lord our God with all of our hearts. And those who do will have this blessing: Thus saith our God. If with all your hearts ye truly seek Me, Ye shall ever surely find Me, Thus saith our God. May God bless us all with such seeking hearts here at New St. James. For a beautiful heart transforms the world. It is the only thing that ever has.