
Live by heart
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Jeremiah 31:31-34 and John 12:20-33

From Jeremiah we just read, “God will make a new covenant with God’s people. God will put God’s law on the hearts of the people, so they will no longer be able to disobey God”. These are familiar words, and yet somehow, they feel very stark. We need to remember that large swaths of the Old Testament involve a narrative cycle that repeats many times over. The cycle always starts because the people have some type of problem - in other words, the people are complaining. Then, God delivers them from that problem. The people are grateful to God and worship God ... for awhile. And then as time progresses, after life gets back to normal, the people go back to ignoring God. Then, some crisis hits the people, and the cycle starts all over again. That cycle of crisis, salvation, worship, and then ignoring God happens over and over in the Old Testament. In Jewish theology, the new crisis is actually caused by the people forgetting their jealous god. So it’s a nice tight endless loop that exhibits some interesting aspects of the human condition.

And so the part of the story in Jeremiah we read this morning is simply a natural part that story. God gets tired of the people continuously letting God down. God decides that the problem is that written laws can be broken. But that if the law was placed on the people’s hearts, then they would be unable to disappoint God again. The story from Jeremiah in its basic form is simple, and perhaps understandable. The people - the ones who wrote this story - realize that they are on a seemingly never-ending cycle. They are more faithful in times of crisis, and tend to forget about faith when things are going well - which leads to their next crisis. And they are struggling to find a way to break that cycle.

I want to share one other piece of history that may or may not be obvious. Today, we know that human thoughts are located in our brains. But the ancient Greeks had a different idea. The Greeks, apparently, placed the seat of thought in our hearts. Actually, the Greeks located quite a few human functions in our hearts - including intelligence,

memory, and emotions. I suppose that's why we ourselves use strange language sometimes. For example, if I had memorized this entire sermon, I would say that I know it "by heart", when obviously I would mean that the sermon was "in my brain". I share that observation because we should understand that Jeremiah - who wrote long after the ancient Greeks came up with their ideas - was not telling people to avoid thinking. The idea of placing laws in our hearts does NOT mean putting the law away from our thoughts. But rather putting those laws exactly into our thoughts. Writing the laws on our hearts meant having those laws embedded in our brains - so deeply embedded that we didn't need to think about them.

So much for history. Today, I would suggest that when we think about God's laws, we face a different type of tension. I believe that the tension for us is not about whether God's laws are in written or our hearts. I would suggest that the tension is between whether God's laws are in our heads, or in our hands. The real question isn't where laws are stored in the human body. The real question is whether or not the laws stored in our heads are actually put into practice with our hands (and feet). Or in modern terms, "Do we live out God's laws, or do we just talk a good game".

Muslim scholar Safiyah Fosua put it this way. "The tension between head knowledge and righteous living is resolved by changing where the law is written - from stone tablet to the human heart". Fosua sees the tension today between head knowledge and righteous living. Dan Dick says, "How often do we forget the basics? How regularly do we ignore compassion, mercy, sacrifice, and justice in favour of personal comfort, security, enjoyment, and entitlement?" How often do we follow along without reflecting on our lives, and continue our own "endless cycles" that lead us nowhere except around and around.

[image: metropolis]

I'm reminded of a movie (of course!). In this case a really cool movie from 1927. Black and white. A silent movie. In German. It's the movie "Metropolis". The movie depicts the life of a city - a metropolis - which has two classes of people. On the one hand, we have an upper class, the thinkers and designers. And on the other we have the workers. It's an industrialized vision of the blue collar/white collar split. But the split is

described in the movie as “head” versus “hands”.

[image: hands people]

The hands people are trapped in exhausting, tedious work, servicing the machines that were invented by previous generations of the head people. The hands people have lives that are dull, boring, and physically demanding. They are hopeless.

[image: head people]

The head people have their own problems, mainly because without any actual work to do, they suffer from a lack of purpose. Their lives seem pointless. Both groups need each other, but it is the prophet

[image: maria]

Maria - who recognizes the need for a mediator. A saviour - who can cut through the barrier between the hands and head. And reunite all people into just “people” that are all equally valued and equally important. Their society has stagnated into an endless cycle of servicing the same machines or being bored. And that cycle needs to be broken.

[image: Maria preaching]

Maria preaches to the hands people that a mediator is coming. And he arrives, in the form of Freder, the only son of the leader of the head people.

[image: freder]

Freder is not really a head person. He is not really a hand person either. He is a heart person. And after a lot of action, drama, and a modest amount of 1927-style romance, Freder is able to unite the leader of the hand people with the leader of the head people.

[image: the mediator ...]

And the big finale to this 2.5 hour movie (remember, this is a silent movie) are the words “The mediator between head and hands must be the heart”.

The desire to live by our hearts is clearly an old idea. It made sense to Jeremiah. It made sense to Maria and Freder. The need to break out of endless cycles is also an old desire. The people with Jeremiah could not break out of their cycle of disobedience to God. And the people of Metropolis could not break out of their cycle of meaningless living.

The story from John gives another example of an endless cycle. In John’s story,

some Greek people come to Jesus - and it's a big deal that they are Greek. They are not allowed to speak to Jesus directly. They have to go through the disciples, Philip and Andrew for screening. Philip and Andrew do not trust these people because they are foreigners, not "one of them". But when Jesus gets wind of it he says there is nothing to worry about. "I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit". Jesus was saying that his ministry was NOT about staying small and safe, and living in the past. His ministry was about growth - growth through change and transformation to embrace a future that is not exactly like the past. Outsiders are not people we should fear. Outsiders are people that we should welcome with open hearts. Outsiders are an opportunity! And yet, 2000 years later, we sometimes distrust people who we claim are different from us. From immigrants, to refugees, to the now very tired image of the "Evil Russians", we are trapped in an endless cycle of not trusting people who are not like us. When will we learn. When will we break that endless cycle. And when will we break the cycle of wanting to keep our past instead of embracing our future?

I suppose this is actually literally true for us here at Sydenham-Heritage United Church. Projections show that Brantford will grow by 60,000 people in the next 20 years. Are we going to embrace these "new" people? Are we going to welcome them and learn from them? Are we going to figure out what they need and put on programming they need? Or will we only welcome them if they act like we do?

But back to the phrase, "The mediator between head and hands must be the heart". Perhaps it has another significance for us today. Particularly since today is also our Annual General Meeting. Because I know that social justice is part of the fabric that makes up this congregation. When we reflect on social justice, I think people very naturally fall into one of two camps. One group of people like to do charitable actions, like serving food to homeless people. And the other group focus on education and advocacy work. Both of those approaches to social justice are certainly needed and very valuable. And I know that people at Sydenham-Heritage have been deeply involved in both of these aspects of social justice.

It's perhaps an over-simplification, but I think of the people who support social

justice action like the “hand people” in Metropolis. And the people who support advocacy are like the “head people”. So who are the “heart people” in this analogy? Perhaps the heart people include those of us who use the lens of justice to build deeper relationships. Does Sydenham-Heritage have a vision of also being a heart in this community A heart that beats for justice and relationship in Brantford and beyond? I wonder.

[image: heart]

I want to close with a more personal message. Because on a personal level it's easy to become stuck in endless cycles. How about the cycle of being very negative, which leads to disappointment, which leads to being critical, which leads to being more negative? What about the cycle of being very judgemental, which leads to an unwillingness to forgive others, which leads to resentment, which leads to being more judgemental? I'm sure each of us can think of endless cycles in our own lives that are not helping us.

Well, this is Lent. And Lent is a time to reflect on our lives, recognize whatever endless cycle we are trapped in, and take the opportunity to break free from those cycles. And we stop those cycles by recognizing what it is that God has written on our hearts. And in fact, by recognizing that God has written on our hearts at all.

We are children of God. We are loved by God. We are loved. We break our cycles as we recognize that we are capable of better. That we deserve better. God's love is stronger than many trivial problems we are facing. God's love is stronger than whatever drama we are now living through. God's love is stronger than the cycles that we long to break. God's love is enough. We are enough. You are enough.

Do you long to be happier? Stop focusing on the negative and focus on the blessing you have all around you.

Do you want to have a better life? Start each day by writing down 5 things you are truly grateful for.

Do you feel lonely? Reach other to other people and you will find that you are not alone.

Do you want to be less impacted by negative people? Stop hanging around negative people.

God says that you are worth it. I say that you are worth it. The only challenge left is for you yourself to believe that you are worth it.

This is Lent. And the heart of Lent is transformation. Lent is way better than Christmas!! Lent blows the doors off Christmas. At Christmas you might get new socks. But during Lent, you might find new life.

Embrace life. Embrace love. Embrace God. Live by heart.

Amen.