

Sermon #7: Opening the Heart

Ezekiel 11:19-20; Acts 2: 37-47; Psalm 23; Luke 24: 13-35

Mark English tells the story of a time he was part of a crowd standing at the entrance to a Wal-Mart waiting for a sudden downpour of rain to die down so they could get out to their cars in the parking lot. He said it was the “kind of rain that gushes over the top of rain gutters, so much in a hurry to hit the Earth [that] it has no time to flow down the spout.”

One person in that crowd was a little freckle-faced six-year-old girl, standing by her mother. Suddenly, this girl broke the silence of the crowd by saying, “Mom, let’s run through the rain.” “What?” Mom asked. “Let’s run through the rain!” she repeated. “No, honey. We’ll wait until it slows down a bit,” Mom replied.

This young child waited about another minute and repeated: “Mom, let’s run through the rain.” “We’ll get soaked if we do,” Mom said. “No, we won’t, Mom. That’s not what you said this morning,” the young girl said as she tugged at her Mom’s arm.

“This morning? When did I say we could run through the rain and not get wet?” “Don’t you remember? When you were talking to daddy about his cancer, you said, ‘If God can get us through this, He can get us through anything!’”

At that point, the entire crowd become totally silent. Mark says, “I swear you couldn’t hear anything but the rain.” No one came or left in the next few minutes. The mom paused for a moment and thought about what she would say.

Some parents might have laughed that comment off or scolded the little girl for being silly. Some might even have ignored what she said. But that was a moment of affirmation in a young child’s life. A time when innocent trust could be nurtured so that it will bloom into faith.

So the Mom said, “Honey, you are absolutely right. Let’s run through the rain. If God lets us get wet, well maybe we just needed washing.” Then off they ran. The crowd at the doorway just stood watching, smiling and laughing as the mom and daughter darted past the cars and through the puddles.

They held their shopping bags over their heads just in case, but they got soaked. And they were soon followed by a few others who screamed and

laughed like children all the way to their cars. One of those who followed was Mark English, the pastor who told the story.

Sometimes, just sometimes, there are moments when you can peek behind the veil of the everyday world and catch a fleeting glimpse of God in action. The early Celtic Christians used to call that type of moment a “thin place” – that is a moment or place where the eternal seems to be just under the surface of the everyday.

Today, I want us to reflect on the thin places of our lives – the moments in which tightly-furled hearts open like flowers to the wonder of God’s presence in our lives. What keeps our hearts green and growing? And what makes them close down and shut God out?

One time at choir practice in Shoal Lake we were practising our opening hymn “Come and Find the Quiet Centre”; someone commented on how much we need what that song is about! We need a time to get away from the bustle and business of life that makes us crazy, and find the space and time to sit quietly and allow God to open our hearts. The pace of modern life winds us up so tight it’s like we’re human pretzels. When I think about what our lives can do to us I had the image of a bendy rubber doll – like a Gumby or something like that – twisted up like a corkscrew. Not exactly an image of being open. Sometimes we don’t even have time to pay attention to our own thoughts and feelings, much less what’s happening with other people. How do we unwind some of that tightness and find in ourselves an open heart?

When we talk about the heart, we’re not just talking about our emotions. The Bible uses the heart to talk about our deepest and truest selves – what makes us the people we are. The Bible describes hearts that are hard as stone, hearts that need cleansing, hearts that are full of courage, hearts on which God’s word is etched indelibly, hearts that are made new.

A closed heart is a heart with limited vision: the human being whose heart is closed finds it hard to see beyond its own little world. The closed heart is prone to self-justification and even self-deception: we convince ourselves that

the way we are is the only way we can be. The closed heart is a heart in bondage. It is a heart that is obsessed with its own desires and unable to feel and express gratitude. A person with a closed heart does not see the wonder of the world and its mystery. He or she forgets God, and lives most of the time as if God does not exist. A closed heart separates us not only from God but from other human beings, and the rest of creation. A closed heart creates alienation and exile. It lacks connection with others, and therefore is not concerned with issues of justice or the stirrings of compassion.

This likely doesn't describe you all of the time. But it describes all of us some of the time. A while ago I talked about the process of human development that inevitably produces a sense of separation in us, a separation that leads to self-centredness. Each of us experience times when this is who we are – locked inside a shell, away from others and from God. I can tell moments when my heart is more closed than open: when I fail to see the beauty of a day; when my frustration with others outweighs my appreciation of their gifts; when my impatience over-rules the need to be kind. Those are warning signs of a closed heart.

An open heart, on the other hand, is a heart that can see in the fall of rain an opportunity for God's grace. An open heart allows us to experience the Holy in and all around us. Thomas Merton, a Christian mystic, describes it this way:

“Life is this simple. We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent, and God is shining through it all the time.....If we abandon ourselves to God and forget ourselves, we see it sometimes, and we see it maybe frequently. God shows Himself everywhere, in everything – in people and in things and in nature and in events. It becomes very obvious that God is everywhere and in everything and we cannot be without Him. It's impossible. The only thing is we don't see it.”

The thin places in life are able to speak to our open hearts – and experiencing these thin places may help us keep our hearts open. They may be actual places, they may be people, they may be events – but they show us the wonder and mystery of God in marvellous ways.

In a couple of weeks I'll be talking about Christian practices that are central to the life of a faithful Christian – practices like the ones we heard about in Acts:

attendance at worship, sharing possessions, listening to the teachings of the apostles, discussing Scripture, breaking bread together, and praising God. It's important to say that these practices are part of Christian faith precisely because the experience of centuries shows us that they help us keep our hearts open – they produce for us thin places.

One of the reasons I feel so strongly about worship as an essential part of Christian life is because worship is meant to be a thin place. It is meant to allow us glimpses of the Holy. Every type of worship—the silence of Quaker meetings, the emotional fervour of charismatic services, the meditative chant of Orthodox liturgy, the sacraments and rituals of more formal churches – all of these can open us up to the Holy. Congregational worship is when we journey together into an active awareness of the presence of God.

Congregational singing, in our tradition, is one of the most important ways this happens – and I worry that the trend in some churches is to lose this aspect of Christian worship. Many times we end up listening passively, instead of actively participating – though not so much here at Gordon! Sermons, scripture readings, sacraments, public prayer – all of these can open us up to God.

Sometimes in our tradition we get overly caught up in the intellectual understanding of things. For example, when we say the Lord's Prayer or the Creeds of our church, we focus on what they mean. That's not a bad thing, but if we focus too much on the intellectual meaning, then we're too busy concentrating to allow the prayers and the creeds to simply carry us along with the repetition into something that is broader than the mere words. By sharing in these prayers and creeds we are joined together with the body of Christ around the world who are worshipping with the same words – and with the church through the ages

For many of us, special times in the church year, like Easter and Christmas, are the times when we feel drawn into God's presence. And for many of us, it is in our individual practices, of prayer, journalling, retreats, and so on, that we experience the thinness of the material world and the omnipresence of Divinity. This opening of the heart is the purpose of spiritual practice.

An open heart is a heart full of compassion. An open heart is a heart that is passionate about justice. An open heart sees the glory of the world – it is open to wonder and awe. An open heart brims over with gratitude. An open heart is kind and gracious, because it has received God’s grace. An open heart knows, as Thomas Merton said, that the world is transparent, and God is everywhere. An open heart is a heart that burns within us, recognizing the presence of the risen Christ in our midst. It is a heart of flesh , not a heart of stone – a warm beating heart that is open to the world and to God.

Take a moment to ask yourself: is your heart feeling more open or more closed lately? What would help your heart to be more open? Are there thin places that you need to experience in order to open your heart? Take a moment to reflect in the quiet, and then I’ll offer a prayer for us all.

Let us pray: (a prayer by Dag Hammerskjoeld)

Give us pure hearts, that we may see you.

Humble hearts, that we may hear you.

Hearts of love, that we may serve you.

Hearts of faith, that we may abide in you. Amen.