

## SERMON: “Cardiac Shunt”

First United Church, Waterloo – LENT V -- Sunday, March 21, 2021

*PRAYER: “Embrace us wholly, God, by your Word and by your Spirit, that we may be filled with wisdom even as we are sustained by your compassionate care and grace. We pray in the name of the One who showed us your heart, Jesus, the Christ. Amen”*

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Memory work: two words from our school days,  
and, for some of us, from our Sunday School days.

Two words that either cause great excitement or enormous terror.

Some of us have brains well-suited for it; others of us have brains that leak like sieves.

The memory of many of the people of ancient Israel was really quite remarkable.

For centuries, wise ones, elders, and other gifted ones among them

passed down the stories and teachings of their faith tradition

by oral speech around a tribal outdoor fire for instance, or around a family dinner table.

For centuries, none of their Scriptures were written down.

Those words, stories, laws and ordinances, census data were retained in a number of brains,  
or rather, hearts.

For Hebrew people the heart was the seat of wisdom and understanding and memory  
as well as the locus of emotion.

We preserve some of that perception when we refer to “memory work” as “learning by heart”.

### I EXILIC ENDANGERMENT

For somewhat over fifty years after 587 BCE, the people of Israel were in deep trouble.

They had been conquered by the armies of Babylon.

Their homeland was devastated, including their altars, and the great Temple in Jerusalem.

The majority of them were shuttled off into captivity in the environs of the city of Babylon,  
the “Ottawa” or “Washington, D.C.” of that ancient Empire.

Prophets among them told them repeatedly that they were the authors of their own misfortunes.

Their multiple acts of idolatry, their consumptive greed and systems of corruption,

a good deal of sexual depravity were among their catalogue of trespasses against God’s will.

They had forgotten to travel in God’s ways. They had lost touch with God.

Exile not only meant that they were an endangered species and downtrodden minority.

It also threatened the loss of their entire faith tradition..

So, in Exile, priests, wise ones, prophets, and others among them got busy remembering.

They retold their stories, recited God’s laws and commandments, ritual instructions and such  
and enlisted scribes to actually write them down.

During the Exile, was when a good deal of Scripture got written down.

It was a pivotal time for gathering and amassing their faith tradition as sacred treasure  
in a form that could more widely be passed on from generation to generation.

This effort was also spurred on by a change in tune from their chastising prophets. Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and others began to proclaim a fresh divine vision -- a vision of hope, a promise of returning home, of rebuilding their nation and life and faith again. It was a wholesale exercise in which God renewed God's covenant with them. When Jeremiah unveiled that message to his audience of exiles, it came with a special twist: *"It will not be like covenant that I made with their ancestors ... which they broke .... But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days ...: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people."* (Jeremiah 31:32-33) God's analysis of Israel's troubles was that they had developed defective hearts. Something like remedial surgery and treatment was now needed.

## II CONTEMPORARY HEART DEFECTS

We are not unfamiliar with a number of defective heart conditions. I suspect most of us know someone who has undergone procedures like angioplasty, heart valve replacement or by-pass surgery. Some among us have had first-hand experiences like that. A few years ago, I had my own incidence of a minor stroke or T.I.A. There's trouble when blood flow through the lungs diminishes oxygen supply to the blood. Under pressure the heart has to work harder leading to symptoms like fatigue, dizziness, and shortness of breath. One medical diagnosis might be pulmonary hypertension. But the main problem resides in the heart. There's a valve or two that need fixing. Replacement tubing re-routes the flow of blood to reinstitute a more normal pattern. It's comparable to shunting railway cars to a different track. Sometimes, instead of plastic or venal tubes, simple electric shunts can suffice. There's also "hole in the heart", a congenital heart disease involving some disorder in either right-to-left or left-to-right shunting of blood through the heart. Too much blood goes rushing between ventricles and auricles without completing the usual four quadrant circuit. The consequence is that too much blood winds up in the lungs and the lungs can't keep up. Often what is necessary is surgery to repair the leak and relieve the pressure. After that comes a regime of medication intake, oxygen agents and blood thinners, that seek to ensure a more natural, regulated blood flow.

I wonder; rather, let me suggest, that spiritual heart defects among us are similar. Either there's an excessive flow of demands, claimants for allegiance or attention, that cause God to get short shrift; or, we sometimes just manage to block spiritual energy passing through our hearts with regularity. As with ancient Israel, so with us, reduced intake of God's wisdom and guidance, help and presence could quite easily get us into trouble so that straying from God's ways or ignoring God is not only a live possibility but a frequent or daily reality.

Then, it could be that something like by-pass surgery, some cardiac shunt procedure through which an infusion of covenant becoming internalized will restore us. God is ever prepared to perform such an operation. Ask for it. Pray for it. Help it along. *"I will put my law within them and write it on their hearts."*

I suspect that when the ancient Israelites set about to learn God's law, it was a group exercise. No one was left to manage it by himself or herself or one's non-binary identity. Those who found learning and integrating more difficult would have been assisted and encouraged by those for whom it came easier.

An environment of repetitious persistence eventually would get most everyone on board.

I wonder, might we experiment with a brief exercise in group memory work.

Let's consider the Ten Commandments in a somewhat simplified form.

I invite you to repeat commandments one to four in this shortened form after me:

*"No other gods. No graven images. Respect God's name. Keep God's Sabbath."*

Okay go! Again, repeat after me .... And again .... And again ....

Now, try it by yourselves unprompted.

Great. Now let's add on commandments five to ten:

*"Honour your parents. Don't kill. Don't commit adultery. Don't steal. Don't lie. Don't covet."*

Again, repeat after me ..... Again.... And again ....

Now, try it by yourselves. Great!! Let's go for all ten together....

*"No other gods ...."*

However ... knowing them by heart is not enough.

A character in Elie Wiesel's novel The Oath, Rabbi Moshe reminds us:

*"The Torah (God's law) is something to live, not study.*

*God also, must be not merely studied, but lived."* 1

Can we imagine and implement going about our daily lives giving God honour and love, day after day after day? I wonder what that might mean.

It might mean regular prayers of thanks and petition in the morning and in the evening.

It might mean having God direct our thoughts, our speech, our actions and activities until that practice becomes as natural as breathing.

For, yes, breathing and blood flow into our lungs, through our hearts, lets God's Spirit fills us and pass through us and re-enter again in rhythmic cycles.

It might mean respecting others in all the relationships and encounters we experience each day.

Can we add that into the mesh and mix of life?

For people in most non-North American and non-Northern European cultures upright living isn't about avoiding guilt, it's about either honour or shame.

It's about recognizing that how one treats and relates to others impacts one's whole family, one's clan, one's ancestors, one's community, one's nation.

For most of those other cultures, including ancient Israel that also meant guarding oneself against "the evil eye"

If the heart is the seat of emotion and spirit and thought,  
 the eye is the organ that reflects the light that comes from the heart.  
 Bad light, evil emanations are like bad breath, contagion.  
 Developing healthy, upright hearts is the best protection  
 beyond avoidance or glancing away from those whose eyes are emitting evil.  
 That's what Jesus was clued into when he intensified the Law (cf. Matthew 5:17ff).  
 Violence, killing, and murder are outward manifestations of inner anger and hatred.  
 Fire in the eyes is a sign of a diseased and defective heart.  
 Oh, that we might think and catch ourselves before we erupt or explode!  
 Adultery and sexual deviance are outward manifestations of lust,  
 another heart defect that leaks out through the eyes.  
 While male chauvinism and machismo are yet alive and well in North America,  
 some recent sociological studies of behaviour in North American pub scenes  
 over a stretch of months revealed that women initiated flirting more often than men  
 up to a ratio as high as 70% to 30%.  
 Covetousness, envy, jealousy, and greed are still infectious in our consumer culture.  
 In Latin, African, Asian, Eastern and Middle Eastern cultures  
 these are also signs of evil eyes, of hearts that breathe with toxic breath.  
 So, for instance, if you befriend an Arab or Turkish person and say to them:  
*"Gee, I really love those shoes you're wearing"*, or *"I like that shirt"*.  
 Quite likely that person will remove that article of clothing immediately and give it to you.  
 Thus you and I are advised to never, never say to any parent in such a culture  
 that you admire their child! They will run and shun you  
 fearing that you are intent on stealing their offspring. 2  
 Dr. Sally McFague is not a physician, but is a North American theologian.  
 Early into this new millennium she wrote an eloquent diagnosis of our culture  
 and entreated us to undertake remedial action:  
*"The abundant life for most of us must be conducted with a very sharp eye  
 to the way consumerism ... is both decimating the natural world  
 and creating continually growing inequities between the poor and the wealthy.  
 We cannot love our neighbours – neither the human ones nor the earth ones --  
 unless we cut back on our consumption. Dostoyevsky said:  
 'Love in practice is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams.'  
 The harsh and dreadful thing we well-off North Americans must do  
 is set our discipleship with a thoroughgoing critique of our culture's current lifestyle  
 and offer some alternative visions of the good life."* 3

## CONCLUSION

Respecting and honouring God and others: loving God with all our heart, mind, soul, strength; and loving others as we love ourselves. Jesus compacted form of the Ten Commandments. That has a lot to do with acting humbly, being generous, and breathing compassion. That would be living proof of God's law written within us on our hearts. MI have good intentions of surrendering myself to such a possibility, but ... I confess that words like "obey" and "obedience" towards which I have trouble shaking off what seems like a personal allergy. They are concepts that sit heavy with a notion of being supervised from on high, with being under pressure. Unless ... unless I go back to the roots of those words in their old Latin form. They come from the verb "*obedire*", a compound word that fuses the preposition "*ob*" or "*ab*" meaning "before" with the verb "*obedire*" or "*audire*" meaning "to hear". To hear before. Aye! There's the rub! Not to hear after the fact. Not to hear in the midst of messing up which is still hearing too late. No, to hear before a word from some God-sent source, to be tuned into God's Spirit before the evil light generated in my heart leaks out and causes hurt, or harm, or disgrace. Ah, to hear within what God requires of me, because I instinctively know what's right. There's an obedience I can yearn for, sprung from what's already written on my heart. Not "memory work", but memory on automatic recall, fluid like water, natural as breath. For that, I need God's ever-present help and the help of the community of God's people of whom I am a part. How does that sit or resonate with you? I wonder, might all pray and yearn for some healthful, God-sent cardiac shunt so that together our hearts might generate goodness, breathe out righteousness, justice, peace. Oh, come Holy Spirit, fill us and renew us, now and forever; put God's laws of love within us, write them on our hearts!

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### *Notes*

1 Elie Wiesel, *The Oath*, (Shocken Books, New York, NY: 1986), page 120.

2 My growing comprehension of how Eastern, African, Latin and other cultures are oriented around perceptions of "the evil eye" was generated by a lecture offered on this subject by Dr. Richard Rohrbaugh at "Epiphany Explorations", a continuing education event for clergy and laypeople held in Victoria, BC, January 2006.

3 Sally McFague, *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy in a Planet in Peril*, (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN: 2001), page 22.

