

**“Hearing My Heartbeat”**  
**September 1/2, 2007**  
**St. John’s Lutheran Church**  
**Rev. Elyse Nelson Winger**

We are three weeks into our Fall Series, and I am realizing something.

“Getting Connected to God and One Another” is really a kind of spiritual journey. It is about reflection and action. It asks us to journey into ourselves and our lives so that we can journey back out into our communities and our world with a deeper sense of God’s presence and our purpose. We began with a proclamation of God’s love and grace: You are God’s Masterpiece. We continued with more proclamation and a challenge. Last week, the call was to unwrap our spiritual gifts, to be willing to unwrap ourselves, letting ourselves be unbent and unbound by God’s grace, just as the bent woman in the synagogue was set free from her ailment. And today, we have an opportunity to reflect more deeply on how to unwrap our spiritual gifts: by “hearing our heartbeat.”

Now, I must admit, I don’t always like hearing my heartbeat. It means that I have just over-exerted myself physically. It means that I am really nervous or anxious about a situation...or a person. It means that I am not in control. I imagine there are some here who have had similar experiences...or worse.

Perhaps hearing your heartbeat has meant a trip to the emergency or operating room. Perhaps it has signaled extreme fear and real danger.

But there are other experiences that come to mind. Moments during meditation or periods of prayer. Sitting at the beach, or in the woods, or by a fire, when all is still and everything seems right with the world. And it is so quiet, that you can practically hear your heart steadily beating, almost as if in rhythm with all around you. And it is in those moments when a feeling of wholeness comes forth, a sense of peace pervades, and an experience with the Holy seems possible. *That's* the heartbeat we're called to listen for, and that's the heartbeat that is meant to guide us into a deeper sense of our passions, and of God's passion for us and all creation. Our texts for today do not speak directly to this theme, but they speak to a way of life that can only be experienced if we are connected to the heart of God, and if we see God's heart as the creator and renewer of our own.

For Jesus, faith was a matter of the heart. It was a part of his Jewish heritage and he renewed it in his own life and ministry. Just listen to some Jesus sound bites from the Gospels: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart (and soul and might, and your neighbor as yourself.)" "Blessed

are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”<sup>1</sup> “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”<sup>2</sup> “Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of flowing water.”<sup>3</sup> “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.”<sup>4</sup> “For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come.”<sup>5</sup> “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.”<sup>6</sup>

When Jesus cures the blind man, the paralytic, and the bleeding woman; and when he seeks to comfort frightened disciples—each time—he says, “Take heart.”<sup>7</sup> And when he teaches about forgiveness, he says that it has to happen from the heart.<sup>8</sup> The image of the heart was nothing new. Jesus himself understood the power of this imagery and he spoke to the hearts of his followers—to their core, to the center of their beings. Jesus sought to transform them from the inside out.

One of my favorite stories from the Gospels comes at the end of Luke when two followers of Jesus are making their way on the road to Emmaus. A stranger joins them on their journey, and then at a meal. Bread is broken and eyes are opened to finally recognize that this stranger is indeed their Lord.

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<sup>1</sup> Matt 5:8

<sup>2</sup> Matt 6:21

<sup>3</sup> John 7:38

<sup>4</sup> Matt 12:34

<sup>5</sup> Mark 7:21

<sup>6</sup> John 14:1

<sup>7</sup> ADD THESE

<sup>8</sup> Matt 18:35

Jesus vanishes, but the pair says to one another: “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?”<sup>9</sup> Hearts burning, not for need of Tums, not for want of rest on that seven-mile stretch of dusty road. Hearts burning, because in that conversation, their cores were connecting to one another and thus to God.

The heart’s where it’s at. But Jesus is not about sending us Valentine’s. I’m not sure if Jesus cares if we have an “I *“heart”* Jesus” bumper sticker on our cars. This is not snuggly, cuddly heart talk. This is hearts burning and hearts connecting talk. And Jesus shows us again and again what loving God with our heart, what speaking from our heart, and what acting from our heart is all about. It is about connecting with God and one another by means of law-breaking mercy, scandalous hospitality, and costly compassion.

Today’s Gospel is a testament to this. “When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.” Jesus is being provocative as always. He certainly shared meals with his disciples, with Mary and Martha, with wedding guests at Cana that did not necessarily include the “least of these.” But he also went out of his way to share meals with the despised and

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<sup>9</sup> Luke 24:32

resented of his day, like the tax collectors and Zacchaeus and prostitutes and other various “sinners.” This took heart. This took passion. Our lives as followers of Christ take this same kind of heart and passion. Jesus is always asking us to expand the circle of our concern knowing that it will keep transforming and changing the hearts of all. Jesus wants hearts burning, hearts beating not just for one’s own self, but for everyone. How can we possibly live into the calls for inclusion and mercy and hospitality that Jesus demands unless we are connected to the heart of God? How can we live a life of kingdom reversal like Jesus preaches unless we keep connecting to this heart of Jesus and look to this heart as the renewer and shaper of our own?

My first real experience of kingdom reversal happened during my first Easter in Egypt, spring 2000. Stewart and I were members of St. Andrew’s Church where I would soon be an intern but was currently staff with its Refugee Ministry, teaching English to and with Sudanese adults and children. Two Christian Sudanese congregations also worshipped at this originally Scottish Presbyterian Church smack dab in downtown Cairo. The pastor at St. Andrew’s and the evangelists at the Nuer and Padang congregations agreed that we should worship and eat together on this Easter

morning, and that while the English-speaking congregation was welcome to bring some side dishes, the Sudanese women would serve the main course. Money would be provided for ingredients, but the meat stews and rice and bread would be prepared by the women. When I first learned of this set up, I was skeptical. My gender, class, and race antennae were tweaked to interpret this as a sign of servitude—the refugee serving the expatriate. How could this be authentic Christian community when certain women were being asked to stay in the kitchen? Couldn't we all just help out and bring our share? And by the way, I was really missing the possibility of ham...and scalloped potatoes...and green beans with bacon. I was ready to critique this plan and assumed I would come Easter Monday morning...

Until I walked into that Fellowship Hall and saw the women behind their pots of stew. And my heart burned inside me because I felt like Jesus was opening the scriptures to me, for I saw the humble being exalted and the exalted being humbled. The women were proud to share their most special food with us! As refugees, these women and their families were impoverished, powerless, unsafe, resented, let alone in grief and shock. But as hosts of that Easter banquet, they were like Christ to me, and to all of us. That meal was truly like a foretaste of the feast to come where all are fed

and all are needed. That Easter meal connected me to the heart of Jesus, to the heart of what he was all about: creating community through kingdom reversals, unexpected hospitality, and total inclusion of all. I'll tell you this: I wasn't *looking* for a hearts burning, hearts connecting morning, but the experience of that Easter banquet changed my heart and has shaped my growing passion for justice and equality within Christian community and our world.

So...what do you have a passion for?

What are you doing and experiencing that connects you to the heart of Jesus and to others?

Are you "hearing your heartbeat?"

May this spiritual journey continue. Amen