

**Reclaiming Sabbath: For the Rest of Your Life
(5) Restless Hearts**

A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
2 April 2006

Text: Psalm 51:1-12

A member confessed last week that when she sat down to worship, opened the bulletin and saw the sermon topic, she leaned over to her husband and remarked, "What more could she possibly have to say about Sabbath??!!" I didn't have the heart to tell her to come back next week for another installment. We conclude the series today with a spiritual EKG, a look at the state of our hearts, and a prescription for rest, for restoration and rejoicing.

In an essay, writer Brian Doyle deftly connects the heart's physical phenomena with the emotional and spiritual dimensions we attribute to it. He describes the hammering hearts of hummingbirds that beat ten times a second, powering their 60-mile-an-hour dives, and their stamina to fly more than five hundred miles without stopping to rest--noting also that hummingbirds suffer more heart attacks and aneurysms than any other living creature. He tells of the seven-ton heart of the blue whale, the largest mammal which ever lived, about which we know very little. Hummingbird, whale: Doyle places them among all the creatures of the world, their chambered hearts pulsing with the interior liquid motion of blood and body fluids to say, *We all churn inside*. And then he concludes with this telling analysis of our harrowed human hearts:

So much held in a heart in a lifetime...we are utterly open to no one, in the end....we open windows [to others] but we live alone in the house of the heart. . . .when young we think there will come one person who will savor and sustain us always; when we are older we know this is the dream of a child, that all hearts finally are bruised and scarred, scored and torn, repaired by time and will, patched by force of character, yet fragile and rickety forevermore, no matter how ferocious the defense....You can brick up your heart as stout and tight and hard and cold and impregnable as you possibly can and down it comes in an instant, felled by a woman's second glance, a child's apple breath, the shatter of glass in the road, the words "I have something to tell you"....the brush of your mother's papery ancient hand in the thicket of your hair, the memory of your father's voice early in the morning echoing from the kitchen where he is making pancakes for his children. [Brian Doyle, "Joyas Voladoras," from the American Scholar, reprinted in The Best American Essays 2005, Susan Orlean, editor,

pp. 28-30]

The heart has long been a symbol for intangible human realities— the seat of emotion, the engine of will, the temple of spirit. Both Hebrew and Christian scriptures employ this symbolism as it particularly reflects one's relationship with God, and warn that when that primary relationship is broken, the heart suffers. The prophets speak of a "hardened heart," clogged with the consequences of sin and selfishness. Others write of the wayward heart, restless and far from home. In the morning text, the Psalmist prays for "a clean heart," which from the Hebrew religious perspective meant one purified from the actions, behaviors, and even thoughts that corrupted it. In poetic language resonant with Christian baptism, the Psalmist asks that God "wash" and "cleanse" him and make him new. Some scholars attribute this text to King David, and surmise that it was prompted by guilt over his involvement in the murder of the husband of Bathsheba with whom he had initiated an affair and who had become pregnant with his child. But because there are no specific details in the text to link it to this situation, it is able to address a far broader range of heart conditions with a kind of wisdom born of experience. Though unflinching in its assessment of the universality of human sin, the Psalm is almost a sigh of relief, in trusting anticipation of divine mercy. Listen for God's word to you in the reading from the 51st Psalm, at the first verse (p. 520 of the Old Testament section of the chapel/pew Bibles if you wish to read along silently).

PSALM 51:1-12

What is your reaction to this prayer of confession? How do you respond to its repeated acknowledgement of personal sin, and the sense of need for divine cleansing and healing? The poet has laid bare his soul to see its true condition, and recognizes that he cannot reclothe it without God's help.

Confession like this goes against the grain of our North American can-do spirit. We are self-reliant, hard-working, and multi-talented people who can resolve any problem we put our mind to. As I read the text this week, I found myself at times dismissing it as hyperbole, the words of someone wallowing in guilt and self-pity. Visions of hair shirts and self-flagellation came to mind-- unhealthy, over-the-top religious practices born of the fear of God's wrath and judgment. In this version of the religious life, humans are depicted primarily as sinners who need to be ashamed of their lives, and come to get their hearts right with God.

But I wonder if we miss something by too-quickly consigning confession to one singular expression. In his thoughtful book, *The Heart of Christianity*, Marcus Borg identifies three biblical perspectives on the life

of faith. One perspective is this emphasis on humanity's fallen nature, and our need for God's grace and forgiveness. But there are two other perspectives that speak to the state of our hearts. One is the story of Exodus, and the recognition that like the children of Israel we too are captives, enslaved to various masters and in need above anything else to be set free. Another perspective is found in the Exile story in which the people are conquered, the nation destroyed, and are forced to immigrate to the four winds. Who of us has not from time to time felt the loneliness and lostness of being separated from where we know we truly belong? What difference might it make to describe our condition not as "dirty" but as "homesick?"

Confession is really nothing more (but nothing less!) than saying how things are with us. It calls us to examine our lives which includes the ways we have fallen short of God's intentions—the things we have done wrong, and the good things we have left undone. But it is more than that, and confession that focuses exclusively on humanity's imperfection misses the full measure of spiritual discipline and the blessing derived from it. Confession also calls us to examine our lives and look for signs of God's presence and activity there. Notice how the Psalmist weaves these two together in our text: acknowledging his need while simultaneously affirming God's presence and grace. *Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love.*

Sabbath-keeping similarly holds these two together in dynamic tension. In the space created by rest, we see more clearly how things are. We are confronted by our frantic busyness, by our rebellion against God's righteous realm, by our own inability to love. In that same space, we come to see a truth that is often obscured: that God is there too. We were made for you O God, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in you. One of my favorite U2 songs describes this restlessness in the swirling chaos of a dance club; the singer looks for something to take hold of, to regain his balance, and spots a woman "with Jesus 'round her neck." Later he sings, "Your love is teaching me how to kneel." [*"Vertigo" from "How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb." Interscope Records, 2004*] Remembering Sabbath helps us regain balance in our lives. It helps us acknowledge and worship the God who made us and who loves us not to death, but for life.

Observant Jews mark three stages of Sabbath-keeping: rest, revelation and redemption. Each yields special blessing. We cease from labor and discover a richer life; we reflect on God's Word and find truth beyond what meets the eye. And something more. We receive a promise; we have a little taste of heaven and catch a glimpse of God's Kingdom that is still to come. For Christians, these three blessings come together in our

family meal, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. We come to this table at Christ's invitation, because this is where we belong, no matter who we are or where we live. Christ is the One who calls all the children home to the feast. We come here to remember that God has done for us what we could not do for ourselves. We are nourished here for our work and for the tasks to which God calls us. We are strengthened here to persevere until that day when God makes all things new and the whole world resounds with the joy of salvation.

TO THE GOD OF ALL GRACE, WHO CALLS US TO SHARE GOD'S ETERNAL GLORY IN UNION WITH CHRIST, BE THE POWER FOREVER! AMEN.

In Reformed worship, the confessional section is most often near the beginning of the service. That's our practice, and it's fine. But I sometimes wonder if the order sends a message that we have to confess so that God will bless us---we have to get right with God before we can receive a Word of guidance, of love, of hope. Our Reformed forebear John Calvin suggested putting the prayer of confession FOLLOWING the proclamation of the Word, making it our response to God's grace that cleanses and liberates us and brings us home. We describe our restless hearts, our self-indulgent wills, our weary spirits, and give them to God who unfailingly offers mercy and grace and forgiveness, the hope of a new beginning. And then, because God restores the connection between God and humanity, we respond with joyful gratitude by reaching out in peace to one another.

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