

How Big Is Our Heart?

Romans 9:1-5

Psalm 17:1-7

Matthew 14:1-21

Our responsive reading from the Psalter has a strange request: The psalmist invites God to weigh his heart. Are we up to a divine investigation of how big our hearts are? This is much more complicated than a Senate Ethics committee investigation looking into senatorial peccadilloes or a house finance committee looking into Wall Street Banks. This actually has consequences. Do we really want people to know if we have a small, shriveled up heart that lacks compassion, understanding, empathy, and deep caring for others? Anyone want to admit to being Ebenezer Scrooge or the Grinch or Mr. Potter in *It's A Wonderful Life*? J. Paul Getty, with a fortune of \$2 billion in 1957, installed a pay-phone for visitors to his home near Guildford and had dial-locks fitted on all of the other telephones.

What if God weighed our hearts and listed our names and next to our names posted the size of our hearts? In sports, a person with limited natural ability sometimes makes the big leagues and the only explanation the experts can give, "He has a really big heart." I take that to mean that he really wants it.

If our hearts are big enough, then, we will see something that is wrong, something that needs fixing, something that is hurting the quality of life in our city, and we will make it right or fix it or find someone with the money, the power, and the clout to make it right. How big is our heart for the city of Dayton? How big is our heart for our nation?

Let's set the parameters for how you go about weighing a heart. The paradigm of a big heart is Jesus. All other hearts have to be measured by the heart of Jesus.

The heart doesn't exist in a vacuum but in a social, political, and cultural context, in relations with others and things. Matthew seems to have placed the banquet of Herod and the feeding of the 5,000 next to each other for comparative purposes. Herod has a heart shriveled by fear and insecurity. Jesus has the biggest heart in the world. In any event, we get two worlds – worlds apart and yet existing side by side in agonizing tension.

The banquet of Herod is a story about our world – the world of power, sex, and intrigue. Herod shows us the insecurity of power. Herod is afraid that Jesus is John the Baptist raised from the dead. Herod feared the crowd. Herod was afraid of his wife Herod feared the guests at his party and what they would think of him if he did what was right. These people were not his friends: lobbyists, favor-seekers, enemies, but not friends. What's the head of one preacher when a politician needs to protect his reputation as a tough guy? When Herod's step-daughter danced on the table, the drunken king was filled with lust and promised her whatever she wanted. She asked, as we know, for the head of John on a platter. Down in the rock-walled hole of a jail, Herod told John, "It's not personal; it's just politics." Those who claim to rule on our behalf are often scared. They act as if their power is absolute, but they fear that they lack the ability to sustain the power they have for more than one election cycle. Our politicians exist in an unreal world created by pollsters, focus groups, advertisers, consultants, make-up artists, and assorted flim flam

people, and for those who occupy positions meant to sustain the illusion that they are accountable only to their own desires. The amazing insecurity of those in power who depend upon the presumption of those around them is a tragedy. John the Baptist pays with his life for the insecurity, the fear, and the cowardice in the cold heart of Herod.

Jesus offers a banquet completely opposite that of Herod. Make no mistake. Like Herod, Jesus is a ruler as well. Herod is a puppet on a string jerked around by insecurity. Jesus, on the other hand is the ruler of the world. He is what the Caesars insanely claimed for themselves: Almighty God. His rule is not based on fear and insecurity. Nor is it based on getting re-elected. Jesus doesn't have to please anyone. He doesn't owe any favors. "God put the immeasurable greatness of God's power to work in Christ when God raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the age to come. And God has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all" (Ephesians 1:19-23). Jesus Christ is head over all things, for the church. He rules by asking his followers to sacrifice all, just as he sacrifices himself.

Instead of living in fear of scarcity, we are to live in the extravagant abundance Jesus provides. Jesus gives us a new way to deal with offenders – by forgiving them. A new way to deal with violence – by praying for our enemies and suffering. A new way to deal with money – by sharing it. A new way to deal with a corrupt society – by building a new order, not smashing the old. A new pattern of relationships between man and woman, between parent and child, between Jews and Gentiles. (John Howard Yoder).

This is how Jesus always responds to hunger and to scarcity. The text says he had compassion on them. His heart goes out to them.

Whenever Jesus confronted scarcity, he responded with extravagance, generosity, and abundance. When his mother told him that the wedding host had run out of wine, Jesus turned water into wine and not just any old wine, but the best wine and he produced 180 gallons of wine. Perhaps you saw the news story where a forklift operator dropped a container of four hundred and sixty two cases of the 2010 Mollydooker Velvet Glove shiraz wine. That was approximately 585 gallons of expensive wine with a value of \$1 million dollars. Jesus produced 180 gallons or about 30% of the total of the Australian wine. By the way, the word "Mollydooker," for those of you who want to speak Australian, means "left-handed."

The waiting father's response to the prodigal son was a party so over the top that some Christians read the story and mumble, "I'm not in favor of parties for prodigals." Imagine the cost of catering a party like this for prodigal sons and daughters.

The Good Samaritan's response to the man wounded on the Jericho Road. The Samaritan put the wounded man in his car. He took the man to the hospital. He told the doctors, "Here, here's everything - all my credit cards, my checkbook, everything. I'll be back here in a week and, if that's not enough money to treat this man's wounds, I'll give you even more."

And of course, there's the parable where the workers who worked only one hour received a full day's pay. No parable causes more grumbling among good, hard-working people than this one.

Or remember when the rich young ruler, offered the life of joy and peace and love, turned it down and walked away because he had so much money and was so rich. Mark tells us that Jesus, looking on him, loved him. Jesus loves rich people.

Now, let's weigh the heart of Paul. Paul says that his heart goes out to his people, his country, but he feels obligated to underscore the truth of his statement. "I am not lying to you." Just like our world. "Do you want me to tell you the truth?" "Honestly, I swear to you." Truth-telling is not our way of life. Truth challenged at every turn. Truth now has more versions than the Bible.

Well, Paul makes a claim that almost no one makes in our world. "My conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit." What does he mean? Instead of FACT CHECK, Paul claims the Holy Spirit as his confirmation of truth-telling. Well, Jesus says the Holy Spirit will teach us everything. The Holy Spirit is the teacher of the church and through prayer and discernment we are able to arrive at the truth, but we should approach with tentative spirits and open hearts and open minds.

Paul says that his heart is big enough to include all his people. He's talking about the Jews, the people of Israel. I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart for my people and for my country. It's a vision we should keep in our minds and meditate on for a long time: My heart breaks for my people, my nation, my country. Instead of trying to win battles, we need to get on our knees and pray to God for our people – red and yellow, black and white, all our people. God only has one people in mind for saving: For God so loved the world, all the peoples of the world. God has made of one blood all the nations of the world.

My heart goes out to my country. Earlier in our prayer of confession, we prayed part of Katharine Bates' hymn, "America the Beautiful."^[i] Patriotic, yes, but she wrote it as a prayer. If we really love this country, we will drop the self-congratulatory rhetoric (rhetoric, by the way, that belongs to the genre of the eulogy), and we will pray for our country.

Jesus had the biggest heart in the world. Paul had a big and broken heart for his people. All that's left for our work this morning is to ask, "How big is our heart?"

^[i] America! America!
God shed his grace on thee
And crown thy good with brotherhood (and sisterhood)
From sea to shining sea!

God mend thine every flaw,
Confirm thy soul in self-control,
Thy liberty in law!

May God thy gold refine

Till all success be nobleness
And every gain divine!

God shed his grace on thee
Till selfish gain no longer stain
The banner of the free!

God shed his grace on thee
Till nobler men keep once again
Thy whiter jubilee! (Katherine Lee Bates)