

Sermon – John 10:20-33  
David R. Lyle  
Grace Lutheran Church  
5 Lent – Year B  
21 March 2021

“Drawn to the Cross”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Being around children, one witnesses their constant process of learning new information and honing new skills. Our kitchen table is a place of learning, with kids poring over memory verses and mastering mathematical equations, with the hope that this knowledge will stick. Elsewhere, learning that is more tactile is taking place. Fingers find the right keys on the piano, turning notes on a page into music for the rest of us to hear. In the backyard, hands grip baseball bats and hockey sticks, seeking to build muscle memory so that, on the field or on the ice, the actions are more easily repeatable during a game. This work of learning could be described as creating knowledge “by head” and “by hand.” It is mechanical, utilitarian. But once the child (or adult) crosses a certain point, once the information is truly internalized, once the knowledge intermingles with passion, then we need a different phrase. At this point, we say that it is known “by heart.” By this we mean more simple knowledge or memorization; we mean a knowledge that is true and beautiful, that has been so internalized that it naturally flows out. This, when it happens, is a joy to behold.
2. By heart. This is how we were made to know our God. But for all the truth we know, for all the beauty we create, we find ourselves in the midst of a broken world. Broken, we find ourselves in need of new hearts. Jesus, nearing the hour of his cross, speaks judgment against the ruler of this world, and against the world itself. It’s important to note that when Jesus speaks judgment

against the world, or *kosmos* in the original Greek, he is not speaking of God's creation *per se*, but rather of the fallen world that has rebelled against God and organizes itself now against God's good purposes. This world, or system, is both the result of our sin and that which holds us in bondage, alienating us from God and from one another. We were created to know God by heart, but our hearts have gone wrong. No knowledge for our minds, no works of our hands, can restore us. We need new hearts if we are once again to know the Lord.

3. Jeremiah today points to just such a future hope. Throughout Lent, our Old Testament readings have reminded us of the covenant promises between God and the people. From the promise to Noah and the call of Abraham and Sarah, to the gift of the Law at Mount Sinai and the saving from the snakes in the wilderness, God continued to show goodness to the people. The people, however, never held up their end of the bargain for long. When Jeremiah speaks of the new covenant, he notes a key distinction between the new and the old. The old covenant was broken by the people; the old covenant was *breakable*. So long as the covenant is dependent upon us, this broken world will continue to break our hearts.
  
4. This past Tuesday, a young, white man in the Atlanta area murdered eight people, seven of whom were women, six of whom were Asian American women. Consumed by his own addiction, misled by his own warped understanding of God, empowered by his love of guns, and fueled by a recent rise in hate and racism directed at Asian Americans, this young man somehow reached the conclusion that rather than focusing on fixing what was wrong in his own heart, he should instead end the lives of others. While it is certainly true that our sin, yours and mine, will not likely descend to such depths, it is also true that he is hardly an outlier. We are all part of this broken system together, trapped in the same cosmic structure of sin and death. Upon this cold, hard ground, we cry out with the psalmist: "Create in

- me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.” We have broken covenant. We have sinned. We are complicit. And we cannot save ourselves. Nothing we know, nothing we do, will do the trick. We need a new covenant, one that can only come from God.
5. Out of the ashes of exile and ruin, Jeremiah speaks hope for the future of his people. The prophet gives voice to the word of the Lord: “I will put my law within them, and I will write in on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” God is getting out of the bilateral agreement business, knowing that we’ll never make good on our end. Instead of a breakable covenant, God makes an ironclad promise: We will know God by heart, and live for God from the heart, because God’s own Word shall take up residence within each one of us. This is at the heart of the gospel: If we cannot, will not, make our way to God, God will come to us.
  6. And God comes to us in the most surprising of ways. If we stand upon the cold, hard ground of sin and death, it is into precisely this ground that Jesus casts himself. Speaking of the hour that has come, the hour of his glory, Jesus unfolds not a military analogy but an agricultural one. The grain of wheat that is the living Word of God must die if we are to live and bear fruit. While I can claim very little agrarian knowledge, I believe Jesus’ hearers would have been familiar with winter wheat which is planted when the year is at its coldest and most bleak. In an act of annual faith, wheat is sown into the cold ground of winter so that, around the time of Pentecost, the harvest of hope may be brought in. As Moses received the Law from God fifty days after the Exodus, so will God write the Word of life upon our hearts through the resurrection of the crucified Christ and the subsequent outpouring of the Holy Spirit fifty days after Easter. This is God’s glory, at work to bring life out of death, to save us from the culture of death, to help us sing by heart God’s new song – a song that pushes back against hatred and has room within its harmonies for all people of this earth.

7. Today, we come with the Greeks seeking knowledge. “We wish to see Jesus,” they say. And so do we. But we will see him only as he is willing to show himself to us. I don’t know what the Greeks were hoping to see, exactly. Perhaps they thought Jesus would give them answers to their philosophical questions or aid in their existential crises. No doubt they hoped for something glorious. But the glory of Jesus is not the glory this world imagines. The preacher Jennifer Obermueller writes, “The world says that glory comes by way of clear victory over others, so win at all costs. Loss is the end. Death has the last word. Might makes right.” So the world imagines; just so the world is wrong. Jesus doesn’t show himself to the Greeks that day. Instead, he points to the time when he will show the fullness of God’s glory to this world. Lifted up on the cross and stowed in a tomb, he goes to an earthen death. That should have been the end of it, had the world had its way. But God was not done yet. Within the earth, the cross of shame puts forth new roots for a reborn Tree of Life, from which flows forever the life of Christ for us. If you wish to see Jesus, look upon his cross as he draws himself to you. Out of death and into life. There is nowhere else you need to look; nowhere else you will find the life you need. His word is written upon the new heart that God is giving you. Your sins are remembered no more. May you, marveling at the glory of the Christ whose death has undone death, live now by heart the gospel life of faith. In the embrace of the cross, you are held within the very heart of God. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep you hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.