

*When Heart and Mind Collide in Matters of Faith*

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University Congregational Church

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**Reading: Psalm 22: 1-26a 9 (NRSV)**

**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.**

**Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.**

**But I am a worm, and not human; scorned by others, and despised by the people. All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads; Commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver – let him rescue the one in whom he delights.**

**Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother's breast. On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God. Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help.**

**Many bulls encircle me, strong bulls of Bashan surround me; they open wide their mouths at me, like a ravening and roaring lion. I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted in my breast; my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death.**

**For dogs are all around me; a company of evildoers encircles me. My hands and feet have shriveled; I can count my bones. They stare and gloat over me; they divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots.**

**But you, O Lord, do not be far away! O my help, come quickly to my aid! Deliver my soul from the sword, my life from the power of the dog! Save me from the mouth of the lion!**

On the bottom of our church stationary are these words, “where head and heart are equal partners in faith.” It is a fine trailer or slogan, if you will. I think it is something that we would like to believe in the best

of circumstances. This is the kind of church where the quest for faith respects and honors the place of reason and feeling; of thought and inspiration; of logic and intuition. We very much want this congregation to give equal value to the intellect and the soul. Such a phrase is found in many denominations today. One example is the United Methodist Church's slogan, "Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors."

On a Sunday-to-Sunday basis I think that is very representative of us. We expect the minister to have done his or her homework in the preparation of sermons and adult Christian education. A modicum of humor and inspiration are appreciated. We respect the challenge of Mozart and Bach in our church music. And we can also enjoy a bit of blues, jazz, and gospel music. We want our children to learn something in their Sunday school class, but also to have enough fun that you do not have to fight with them to get them to go to church.

I think this is especially true when things are going relatively well in our world. We revel in the thrill of new scholarship such as found in the Jesus Seminar. We ponder the fact that some New Testament scholars think that in the synoptic gospels we can only attribute to Jesus less than 20% of its content. We have learned that writers and editors have added material that suited their political or ecclesiastical agendas. They re-

arranged the material to suit their individual narrative. Some expanded the parables of Jesus to match their own literary style or offer interpretive commentary. On the one hand this research has given us the tools to separate the Jesus of history from the Christ of faith. On the other hand this has given people like me a new way of approaching Jesus that engages both my intellect and my soul.

The powers of reason and research have also allowed us to call into question the doctrines and creeds that once defined Christianity and what it means to be a member of a Christian church. I doubt that many in this room could recite the Apostle's Creed without reservations, caveats, or flat-out rejection. We could not get through it without edit or censor.

The fact of the matter is that most of us are children of the Enlightenment. We really put our trust and faith in the powers of reason, the methods of science, the benefits of technology, and those broader humanitarian principles that transcend our provincial religious beliefs. If you are in an automobile accident you will not want the EMTs to bring you to church. You will want them to bring you to hospital.

I will be perfectly honest with you. This is how I live my life. On a day-to-day basis I rely on common sense and reason. When I go to the doctor I am not interested in what church he belongs to or what he

believes. I am much more concerned with his diagnostic and medical treatment skills. Likewise, when I read the Bible or a book on theology I am inclined to read it critically. Does it make sense? Has it built a solid argument? Is the language inclusive or exclusive? Is it sectarian or universal? What new information from archeology, sociology, or literary criticism can I bring to bear on the subject?

I love the life of the mind. I love to read, study, and think. It has an honored place in my life and ministry. But without fail the life of the mind is inevitably interrupted by a human hurt, or need, or crises. It can be as simple as a child who cannot get the lid off of a jar – OK, when I cannot get the lid off the prescription bottle; or someone in the church has been injured or is dying; or when my wife grabs me by the ears and says, “Listen bud, you and I are going on a date this weekend and you may not bring your Blackberry – or a book.”

All of the wonders of the mind cannot save you from or absolve you from the hungers of the heart. Oh, we can pretend that we can understand all human desire and fear. But sometimes life just breaks in on you and things do not make sense. They are not just or fair. It is not right or reasonable. Consider this example. After the Exxon Valdez Oil spill in Alaska, the average cost of rehabilitating a seal was \$80,000. At a

special ceremony, two of the most expensive animals that were rescued were being released back into the wild. The large crowd applauded and cheered as they watched the release. A minute later, in full view of that same crowd, an Orca rose up out of the water and devoured both seals.

Think of all of the dedicated science that went into the cleaning and salvaging of those seals: the planned veterinarian care, the hours of thoughtful and careful work. Imagine the initial fund raising efforts, the plodding of litigation to acquire restitution to pay for the rescue project. And in the case of those two seals it all came to a violent end. Of yes, it is perfectly logical that the hungry Orca ate the seals. We understand survival of the fittest. But do you think that was a real comfort on that beach? I seriously doubt it.

We can do a biopsy on tissue and identify the cancer cells contained within it. We can project the life of the cancer, determine its level of growth, evaluate possible treatment plans, and estimate a prognosis. No doctor will tell you this is an exact science. But it is the best scientific information we have. And the news is devastating, even if there is a reasonable chance that the cancer can be treated. We are frightened and we will go home and search the Internet to gain as much information as we can to conquer that dread disease. And we will weep

and fall on our knees and pray that God will spare us. We will bargain and promise all kinds of reform and acts of charity.

Our hearts and minds collide in such matters of faith. What happened to that robust intellectual program that we brought to Biblical studies, theology, and Christian ethics? What happened to the hermeneutic of suspicion that we have cultivated since adolescence? It is reported that Alfred North Whitehead once said something to the effect, “All theology wrecks on the shoals of suffering.”

The psalmist describes us so perfectly when we are confronted by the horror of disease, death, and opposition: “I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast; my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death.”

You know that feeling when you discover that your spouse is having an affair; when the doctor gives you the diagnosis of a disease that will radically change your health or kill you; when you lose your job; when the house burns down; when the phone rings in the wee hours of the morning and the operator is death calling. It can even be a close call and your life pours out like water, yours bones are out of joint, and your heart melts like wax.

My son told me the story of a friend of his who was killed in Afghanistan. The young man was a huge and gregarious fellow. My son said, "He was a really nice kid." The soldier was manning the 50-caliber machine gun on a humvee. An enemy combatant fired a rocket-propelled grenade that took our soldier's head off. Christopher concluded the story by taking his comrade's rifle back to their barracks and cleaning brain matter off of his weapon.

I don't mind telling you, I felt a little poured out, disjointed, and dry-mouthed. I certainly felt sadness for the death of the young man. But I also know that soldiers in humvees rotate positions on a regular basis. Driver, passenger, and gunner switch off. It was not Christopher's turn to be the gunner in that humvee but it could easily have been.

When these horrible chapters break into the planned and ordered narrative of our lives we are devastated. We are stupefied and we ask questions like: "How did this happen?" "Why did this happen?" "Why did this happen now?" These are the most natural questions in the world, but they are questions that have no rational answers. Oh yes, you can find physical or medical explanations to the chain of events that led to the tragedy. But these are not really questions of the mind. These are the

questions of the heart. They might help us understand some day when we are ready to hear. But they do not bring comfort in the moment of grief. Part of our shock comes from the fact that no explanation really makes sense to us. “I just saw her yesterday and she was the picture of health.” “We talked on the phone last night and he seemed fine.” “She was such a careful driver.” “He was so young. If anybody deserved to live it was he. We had been praying for him every Sunday morning in this very room.” And inevitably we hear the question, “Why did God let this happen?”

My biggest concern for this collision of heart and mind is how we prepare the heart for the inevitable tragedies that knock us down, string us up, and cast lots for our belongings. One of the conclusions that I have come to is how we train the heart. We go to great efforts to train the mind, mostly through education in high school, college, and graduate school. If we are really smart we continue to expand our base of knowledge through reading, continuing education courses at local universities, or on-line education opportunities. But it seldom occurs to people that we also have to train the heart. And in terms of spiritual discipline we have to ask, “Have we trained our hearts beyond the realm of reason; beyond the logic of cause and effect; beyond the obvious continuum of life and death.” It is the easiest thing in the world to say,

“Everybody is going to die some day.” Every one of us has said that. But when the doctor says, “You’re going to die in three to six months,” our response is never so glib or Stoic.

I think that the greatest discipline is the one that trains the heart to trust, not only beyond the realm of reason but even beyond the realm of imagination. Do we trust the love of God, the hope of God, the truth of God, the beauty of God, and the goodness of God beyond what we can know, verify, or imagine? Can you affirm with the fullness of heart, “The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away; blessed is the name of the Lord?” By affirmation I do not mean some fatalistic resignation. I mean the full affirmation that all of life’s giving and taking, birthing and dying, blessing and sorrowing pass through the presence of God. God is with us, no matter what! Mechtild of Magdeburg (a Medieval mystic and Benedictine nun) wrote, “The day of my spiritual awakening was the day I saw – and knew I saw – all things in God and God in all things.”

Every morning I pray these words: “We entrust all who are dear to us to Your never-failing love and care, for this life and the life to come; knowing that You will do for them far more than we can desire or pray for.”<sup>1</sup> And at night, from *The Book of Common Prayer*, “Keep watch,

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Benson, *Venite* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 2000), p. 28.

dear Lord, with those who work, or watch, or weep this night, and give thine angels charge over those who sleep. Tend the sick, Lord Christ; give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous; and all for thy love's sake. *Amen.*<sup>2</sup>

Both of these prayers are prayers of trust. I train my heart by repeating them every day. I try to think of those whom I love so dearly and wonder if I can trust their future beyond what I would hope for them, what I would plan for them, or what I would even imagine for them. I pray for the faith that offers them up out of my design and control into the hands of God as expressed by my family, my friends, and my church. I am talking about something greater than an estate plan, will, or life insurance policies. I think about Emily, for example. Could I trust her premature death to a larger life and meaning than the one I have known? Or if I were to die before she reaches the age of majority can I die with peace in my heart, knowing that her safety, wholeness, and character are in good hands? The training of my heart is the daily discipline of prayer and contemplation on the real issues of faith and trust. Teresa of Avila suggested that in this discipline, “The important thing is not to think much but to love much and so do that which best stirs you to love.”

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<sup>2</sup> The Episcopal Church, *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 71,

The story is told about the sinking of the U.S.S. Thresher off the coast of New England in 1963. During test dives the submarine sank to a depth of 8,400 feet, its hull crushed under such great pressure. During the days of searching for the shipwreck the families of the seamen and the nation prayed anxiously for the safety of the crew. A television reporter asked a child of one of the sailors if he was worried about his father. The little boy replied, "Mister, don't you know that even the depths of the sea are in the hollows of God's his hands?" The Psalmist wrote, "In his hands are the caverns of the earth, and the heights of the hills are his also. The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands have molded the dry land." (95: 4-5)

We train our hearts to trust that God has brought us this far. We train our hearts to trust God for the future. We train our hearts to love those who have traveled with us and ease their burden along the way. For in the end, to quote Teresa again, "Love is not great delight but desire to please God in everything." And if I might add, in every circumstance known to the human condition.

*Finis*