

Proper 24C; 17 October, 2010
Jer 31:27-34; Ps 119: 97-104
2 Tim 3;14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8

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What is inscribed upon your heart?

When I look back at my earliest memories, I have a grainy image of riding a horse along a beach. It's a blur of speed and freedom and the sussing of the waves. For years, I thought it was imaginary: a pastiche of images which came from reading *The Black Stallion* too many times. Later, however, my mother mentioned that when we lived in Mexico when I was two, we used to rent horses and ride along the beach, with me perched on a saddle with her or with my father. So now I know that that image is a first taste of beauty and freedom, one which has marked me forever.

Today's readings show us the importance of that heart-deep formation. Through Jeremiah, God promises the Hebrews that there will be a time of restoration. They may now be in exile, uprooted from their land and their people, living under a foreign law, struggling to make ends meet, surrounded by the babble of foreign tongues, but there will be a day when God will seek them out "to build and to plant." (Jer 31: 28). No longer will they pay for the sins with which other people have wrecked their lives; instead, they will once again have the freedom to make their own future. But the promised restoration is not of body only: it is a restoration of soul. Always, the people of God had had the great gift of the divine law. Always, they had had the opportunity to learn the things which give life and live them. But now, God promises, he will write that law on their very hearts. It is the promise of a new and striking intimacy: "I will be their God, and they shall be my people." (Jer 31:33) Not on tablets of stone shall the ways of God be found, but fully embodied in the living flesh of the people of God.

For Christians, this passage points straight to the babe in the manger, to the man Jesus who walked and talked and lived among us. But it points past him, as well, to all those baptized persons who have lived with the Holy Spirit in their hearts. Timothy is a kind of first-fruits of that promise, for he is the first person we know to have been raised as a Christian. When Paul writes to him, "continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing...how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus," he is speaking of a new thing: a child raised as a Christian, having full knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures¹, but reading them through the lens of Christ as pointing toward the salvation of all humankind. In fact, Timothy not only knew the Bible; he became the Bible! -- not only in entering its chapters, but in having it written on his heart.

St. Paul continues, "All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work." (2 Tim 3: 16-17) Those are challenging words, these days, as the very idea of Scripture as an inspired text has become a cause for strife between people who disagree about what it means. For many Christians, it means that the Bible was written by the very hand of God or dictated word by word to holy men, that each word was laid down as ultimate truth and is clear to a plain or literal reading. Others believe that, although God wrote it, it was meant to be authoritative only about spiritual things -- not about things like scientific fact or cultural customs. Still others doubt that it is inspired at all. They would say that it was written by human beings, contains many errors, and is, at best, repository of wisdom on the same level as the *Upanishads* or the *Odyssey*.

¹ At this time, of course, there was no New Testament yet, so when the New Testament authors refer to "the Scriptures," they are speaking about the Hebrew Scriptures.

Most of us in the mainline Protestant traditions embrace a middle way. We acknowledge that the Bible was written by human beings who were struggling to articulate their experiences of God. The understandings evolve over the course of the book, which requires us to interpret as we read because the authors were limited by the constraints of their own language, their own understandings, and what was imaginable in their culture². Like its most ancient readers, we embrace a variety of figurative ways to read it, understanding that the literal reading is often not the most insightful lens it offers.³ And yet, we still cling to this idea of inspiration because our own experience and that of the faith community has shown us that the Bible works as a powerful icon through which we can see God. And so the Bible has the power to bring about encounters with God⁴ -- encounters which can change our lives.

It does not take much reading of Scripture to see that these encounters are a full-contact sport. God is not contented with decorous prayers, "please, sir,...if you're not too busy right now...and if you wouldn't mind...." Rather, God comes in like a whirlwind and turns the lives of his followers upside-down; to have an encounter with God is to abandon one's defenses and stand naked in the storm. Annie Dillard writes, "It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares."⁵ Martin Luther points toward this when he writes, the "words [of Scripture] are not, as some think, mere literature; they are words of life, intended not for speculation and fancy but for life and action." These words do not stay passively on the page; they take up residence in our heart and disturb our normal, shaking us out of complacency and into a holy hunger for life.

Today's parable about the unjust judge is a case in point.

As many of you know, I have a new puppy at home. Pippin is a master of the art of communication. When he wants something, he goes to it and waits. But if what he wants is not forthcoming within an acceptable amount of time, he begins to cry. I can call back, "Not now, Pippin!", or "I'm writing a sermon, Pippin," but, in a few minutes, I find myself thinking, "OK-- I'm never going to be able to continue with this until I give him what he wants." And so I empathize with the judge in today's parable!

Having said that, however, this is a strange and audacious image of God: to compare him, not to a righteous judge, but to an unjust one. You can imagine Jesus standing on a street corner in Argentina and telling his disciples, "There was once an evil dictator who had no respect for the law or for what people thought of him. In his land, there was a woman whose son had been taken by the goon squads. And every night, she would stand outside the dictator's window and call out, 'Where is my son? Where are the *desaparecidos*?' After many days, the dictator said to himself, 'This woman keeps disturbing my parties and my sleep. She is scaring away my mistresses. I enjoy torturing her son, but if I let him out of jail, maybe she will finally shut up.' And so, he let him go. Now, if even that man will do a good thing to regain his tranquility, will not God listen to your prayers?" It's not very flattering to God, is it: to compare him to an unjust man: "At least God will always be kinder than that villain!" It seems kind of -- disrespectful.

It's possible, of course, that Jesus was aiming for a humorous effect, but, if so, it's humor that has an edge to it. Every one of us (just about) has had the experience of praying with all our might for something good, and of going day after day, week after week, year after year with no

² Of course, one of the things which happens in Scripture, and particularly in the prophetic writings, is that God expands human understandings of what is possible.

³ Until the Reformation, most Christians embraced a four-fold method of reading Scripture: the literal reading, the moral reading, the allegorical reading, and the anagogical reading (which pointed toward ultimate things and the life to come).

⁴ I am indebted to Richard and Julia Wilke for this formulation.

⁵ Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, p. 40f, cited by Radcliffe, *Why Go to Church?*, p. 58.

visible result at all. *Lord, let my mother be cured by her chemotherapy. Lord, let my child emerge from the shell of his autism. Lord, please end this war which is destroying my country. Lord, help my friend break her addiction. Lord, are you even up there? Do you care? At all?* We all know, of course, that prayer is not magic: our words and thoughts and tears do not compel the Almighty to act, as if God were a cosmic marionette and we were the puppeteers. Rather, our prayers are God's way of allowing us to share in the work of redeeming the world, of loving one another, of bringing peace. But there are times when even the most faithful person can find herself doubting the whether God notices what is wrong.

It can be easy to feel as if that were an unfaithful attitude, but, in fact, it can be found all over the pages of Scripture. For the Bible is nothing if not searingly honest about what is in the hearts of humankind and of God. When Abraham bargains for the life of the inhabitants of Sodom, when Jacob wrestles the angel, when the psalmist indicts God for sending the Hebrews into exile even though they had been faithful to the covenant (ps. 44), when Jesus cries out on the cross "Why have you forsaken me?", Scripture is bearing witness to faithfulness as a kind of soul-deep struggle in which nothing that is human and real is out of place. The things in our life which we offer to God, God promises to transform; it's the ones we try to hold back which remain untouched by God's holy fire of grace.

I think sometimes it's when we forget this that we are most prone to have "itching ears," to seek for answers in places other than our own faith. (2 Tim 4:3) We turn our own faith into a polite parody of what is real; we refuse to pound on God's door like the old woman badgering the judge, and then we find that it is trivial, that it does not meet the deep needs of our heart. And the reality is that other traditions do contain truth, and so, when we seek for it there, we can sometimes find what we think we need.

But in refusing to go deep, in refusing total honesty in our encounters with God, we will always short-change ourselves -- for our own true need is for intimacy with our creator. The thing about itching ears is that we itch from the outside: it only goes skin-deep. In that way, itching ears are allied to the "profane chatter" we were urged to avoid last week (2 Tim 2: 16): both remain on the surface, pattering on about grocery lists and gossip and fashion and celebrities while our hearts die from within for one simple word of true caring.

When you're standing at the bedside of a dying person, you don't talk about flat-screen TVs. You stammer out what really matters -- *I love you. Forgive me. I wanted more time together. What do you want your grandchildren to know about you?* -- or else you keep silent and simply hold the person's hand. Prayer is like that, true prayer. We bring all the trivialities of our life to God, but only so that, sometimes, we are able to say the deep things: *I wish I loved you more. I am so ashamed. I am angry with you. Thank you, thank you, thank you for the gift of this child, this day, this life.* We seek Christ in all things, so that we may find Christ in our hearts, where Christ has promised that he would be found.

When our ears stop itching, when we are surfeited with triviality, when the world and all its rich offerings start to feel like so many cloying desserts, then we look again for Christ; *then* we turn to the pages of Scripture with hunger enough to learn from them. Martin Luther wrote, "Christ would indicate the principal reason why the Scripture was given by God. Men are to study and search in it and to learn that He, He, Mary's Son, is the one who is able to give eternal life to all who come to Him and believe in Him. Therefore, he who would correctly and profitably read Scripture should see to it that he finds Christ in it; then he finds life eternal without fail. On the other hand, if I do not so study and understand Moses and the prophets as to find that Christ came from heaven for the sake of my salvation, became man, suffered, died, was buried, rose, and ascended into heaven so that through Him I enjoy reconciliation with God, forgiveness of all my sins, grace, righteousness, and life eternal, then my reading in Scripture is of no help whatsoever to my salvation. I may, of course, become a learned man by reading and studying Scripture and preach

what I have acquired; yet all this would do me no good whatever.” (WA 51,4) In the Bible and in life, Christ is the lens which reveals the truth our hearts were made to hold.

The astonishing thing about the promises of God is that they are mutual. God says that he will write his law upon our hearts, but he says elsewhere that he has inscribed us upon the palms of his hands. (Isaiah 49:16) We are not peripheral to God, mere mortal playthings to be moved around a game-board. We are as near to him as the marks of the nails in his palms: a constant presence mingled of love and of pain. Like penguins who can somehow find their own offspring among thousands of identical chicks, God knows each one of us by name, by feel, by the texture of our soul. So do not fear to approach the throne of God. Cry to him of what is in your heart, by day and by night. For the one who was willing to die so that we may have life will not long delay in giving you life indeed -- maybe not the life you asked for, but the life you need: the true life which endures forever. Amen.