

“Jesus, You’re Breaking My Heart!”

The 2nd Sunday of Lent sermon (Year B) presented by The Rev. Philip A. Rodgers
presented Sunday, Feb 25th, 2018 at Trinity United Church in Malton, related to Mark 8:27-38

The Text For The Sermon: *“He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” - Mark 8: 32-33*

Have you ever heard the sound of a heart breaking? Do you remember what it sounds like? Maybe you heard it the day your best's friends heart was breaking when the doctor called to say it's cancer. Maybe it was your sister's heart breaking when she called to say that her marriage was over. Or maybe it was your heart breaking when you realize that you have lost a crucial hockey game, and so many of the dreams you'd held seemed to vanish into thin air. Do you remember what a breaking heart sounds like?

We hear that sound again in today's Gospel reading. It might be hard to detect at first. But if you listen closely, you can actually hear a human heart first tremble under the stress of an uncertain future, and then actually fracture amid severe disappointment and shame.

It happens just outside of Caesarea Philippi, a village 35 kilometers north of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus is walking with his disciples when he asks them what the people are saying about him. It's an interesting question because the disciples have been with Jesus for some time and have seen him cure the sick and lame, cast out demons, feed literally thousands of people, even restore life to a young girl. Little wonder then, that Jesus might ask what the crowds thought of all this. And the disciples do not disappoint, reporting that the crowds indeed recognize that Jesus is clearly a prophet, a holy man of God.

Then Jesus gets to what seems like his real question, asking the disciples themselves directly, "But who do *you* say that I am?" Peter declares that Jesus isn't just a prophet but is actually the long-awaited Messiah, anointed by God to save all of Israel.

Now we'll never know whether that confession had been brewing in Peter for some time, and only needed Jesus' question to bring it forth. For there's something indescribably wonderful about recognizing and participating in a truth bigger than yourself, about naming truth in a way that somehow makes it more true in your own experience. It's like saying, "I love you" for the first time to a beloved and in saying, it realizing just how true it is, even truer than it was just a moment before. That's what happens with Peter just outside of Caesarea Philippi, his heart, brimming over with insight and faith, then only moments later, to have his heart break.

Now, I can guess what you may be thinking – that Peter's heart breaks when Jesus rebukes him. *"Get behind me, Satan! You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things"* Who, after all, could endure such words from the Lord? *"Satan – you call me Satan. Awe Jesus, you are breaking my heart!"*

But I don't think that's when it happens. No, I suspect it happened moments earlier. Listen carefully to Mark's story once again:

Jesus asked them, *"But who do you say that I am?"* Peter answered him, *"You are the Messiah."* And Jesus sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. But then - did you hear it?

First it's faint, just a little tremor, as after Peter's great confession. Jesus neither affirms nor congratulates him, but instead sternly orders the disciples not to tell anyone. What? How can this be? This is the greatest news in the world and you don't want us to share it with anyone? Are you kidding?

Then it gets louder, as Jesus' words make their way past his ears into the depths of Peter's heart and hopes, words that spread like cracks in a windshield. Can you hear them? "*Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering*" – crack – "*and be rejected by the elders*" – crack – "*the chief priests*" – crack – "*and the scribes*" – crack – until at last comes the final blow, "*and be killed*" – and there it goes, Peter's heart, fracturing into a thousand words of disappointment so loudly that it drowns out Jesus' final promise, "*and be raised on the third day.*"

No wonder Peter draws Jesus aside. This is crazy talk. The saviour of the world, suffer? God's messiah, die? Have you gone mad? Peter, you see, wants and needs a strong God. Like so many of his day, he's looking for a descendant of mighty king David to come and overthrow Roman rule and restore Israel. Jesus has to be that person. After all, he's already brought relief, comfort, healing, and life. So what's all this talk about suffering and death? "*Jesus, you're breaking my heart!*"

Peter wants a strong God...and who can blame him. Are we any different? When the crushing weight of hardship bears down upon us, when it's one disappointment after another, don't we also want a strong God to avenge our hurts, to right all wrongs, and to put things back together?

Except...except that it's precisely when I'm down and out, when heartbreaks have conspired to make me feel like I'm nothing, that I wonder what a God of might, strength, and justice – the God of winners, that is – has to say to me, an ordinary guy and Everyday Joe, who often feels far closer to defeat than to victory. Peter thinks: "*Awe Jesus! You are breaking my heart with all that talk of rejection and suffering and death (and what is this resurrection thing anyway?). And then you call me 'Satan!' Please, Jesus, say it isn't so!*" reminiscent of the newspaper boy confronting Shoeless Joe Jackson when the 1919 Chicago White Sox participated in a conspiracy to fix the World Series. Another heart broken.

I think this is what Jesus means in his rebuke to Peter by contrasting divine things and earthly ones. By our human reckoning strength is everything, might makes right, and the one who dies with the most toys wins. But God employs a different measure of strength not in terms of might but of love, not by victory but vulnerability, not possessions but sacrifice, not by glory but a cross.

Jesus knows this; but Peter does not...at least not yet. For this isn't the last time Peter's heart will break. Twice more, if we listen carefully, we'll hear it go. The next comes much later in Mark's story, not in response to what Jesus says but in response to what he himself says, as with his own lips Peter denies Jesus 3 times and then watch Jesus beaten, nailed to a cross, and die...alone. No longer strong, but desolate, no longer thirsting for victory, but desperate for a measure of relief from the pain, Peter will take his twice broken heart and hide, hoping against hope that his despair will some day pass. Until, on the third day, the rumor begins to circulate that Jesus has been raised. And soon enough Peter will hear that the messenger who heralded these tidings said, in fact, not just to tell the disciples, but to tell the disciples *and Peter* – yes, Peter, who denied and fled, Peter, who is now broken and defeated – to tell the disciples and Peter that Jesus would meet them in Galilee, just as he promised.

And at that moment Peter's heart breaks yet a third time. Can you hear it? It is broken wide open by a mercy he couldn't formerly comprehend and knows he doesn't deserve; it is split apart with sudden insight into a divine vulnerability that transcends human measures of strength. It is cracked wide open to the possibility that mercy, grace, forgiveness, life and love surpass our earthly existence on into God's promise of eternal life.

Peter's heart breaks in today's reading because he doesn't get the God he wants. It breaks again at the end of the story, when he realizes that instead of getting the God he wants, he gets the God he needs. So it will also be with us, as we recognize that the God we worship comes not for the victorious but for the vanquished, and seeks out not the mighty but the downtrodden. Our God comes, as Scripture bears witness, to feed the hungry, to heal the lame, to free the bound and to bind up the broken-hearted. Our God comes, that is, for us.

And so we pray: Come, Lord Jesus, break open our hearts that we might perceive your profound love for us and all people and receive your mercy and grace. Amen.