

Don't Follow Your Heart

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren
Sermon for Sunday, May 3, 2009 1 John 3:16-24

Whether we are reading books, watching television or at the movies, most of us like a few surprises. Nothing ruins a story faster than knowing ahead of time just how it is going to turn out. But let's face it – most of the time, we do.

For example, consider the following description of a common scene. The names, places and problems change, but this scene plays out again and again. The main character has an important decision to make. Perhaps two suitors are vying for her affections, or maybe he is trying to decide between staying in a small town or going to the big city in search of opportunity. Or maybe there is a choice between a dependable income or the risk and adventure of pursuing one's dream.

Whatever the particulars of the decision, the tension builds. A deadline looms. In distress, the main character turns to an advisor, usually older and always wiser. After pouring out the details of the problem, the hero or heroine asks the advisor what to do. And time after time, the answer is . . . you know it . . . “Follow your heart!” Follow your heart. In the stories, it always seems to be the right thing to do. It always works. The heart is never wrong. It seems if we can just calm ourselves well enough and long enough to get in touch with what our heart is trying to tell us, each of us has our own little infallible counselor inside.

The “heart” as an infallible counselor is a very popular and enduring idea. Yet no matter how popular and enduring the idea of the heart as an infallible counselor may be, it is not founded in scripture or the Christian tradition. In the Bible and the teachings of the church, the “heart” is certainly seen as a significant, even central part of each person – the part where desires reside and decisions are made. But in scripture, the heart is hardly an infallible guide. Rather, it is recognized as not completely trustworthy. The “heart” has been affected by sin and can harbor evil.

The most famous verse in this regard, and one of the most pessimistic verses in all of scripture, comes from the prophet Jeremiah: “the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked; who can know it?” Jeremiah had watched lots of people follow their hearts into all kinds of unfaithfulness and self-destruction. But Jeremiah is hardly alone in scripture when it comes to observing that the heart can be perverse. The

author of Ecclesiastes wrote, “The heart of the sons of men is full of evil and madness is in their hearts while they live.” The psalmist speaks of the person whose “heart gathers iniquity to itself.” Still other scriptures speak of hard and impenitent hearts, foolish and darkened hearts, the arrogant heart and the blind heart.

Other scriptures, of course, speak of the heart’s potential as a servant of God. Like all else that God created, under the proper conditions, the heart is capable of serving well the purposes for which it was created. The pure heart, the wise heart, and especially the broken and contrite heart are much to be desired. God is able to strengthen and heal the heart, in order to make it function as it should.

In sum, the view of scripture is neither that every person’s heart is hopelessly corrupt and never worth consulting, nor that the heart is pure and always right. The view of scripture is that we must recognize the potential of the human heart to serve both good and evil, to tell the truth and to lie. The heart – that inner core of emotion, desire and will – is no different than the rest of us. It, too, is capable of glorifying God and of rebelling against God. It, too, was created good and retains the potential for good, but must be redeemed from the power of sin before it can fully serve the purpose for which it was created. Most of what the scripture has to say about our hearts needing redemption deals with the human heart as the seat of wrong desires – lust, greed, covetousness. But our text for this morning speaks of another way in which the human heart can be corrupted and deceiving. It speaks of the heart that condemns, the heart full of unremitting guilt. Who among us doesn’t know what it means to feel guilt? I speak not just of regret, but of true guilt, of genuine remorse for the effect of our choices and actions have had on others. Guilt does have its place in God’s plan, as you may have noted when we spoke about the broken and contrite heart that is acceptable to God.

But guilt can also get out of hand. Guilt feelings can be out of proportion to the actual sins committed. And sometimes in human relationships, people try to create guilt simply to control other people. I love the story about the man who called his mother in Florida. He said to his mother, “How are you doing?” She said, “Not so good. I’ve been very weak.” The man asked, “Why are you so weak?” She replied, “Because I haven’t eaten in 38 days.” The son, aghast, then asked, “How come you haven’t eaten in 38 days?” His mother answered, “Because you said you would call and I didn’t want my mouth to be full when the phone rang.”

Another more serious story describes the same attempt to use guilt to

control others. The late Edwin Friedman, a family counselor, told a parable about a man who was visited by an angel. The angel told him that God had something wonderful in store for him, but that the man must begin a journey right away to a certain place where this wonderful thing would be waiting. “Whatever happens,” the angel said, “you must not delay.”

So the man left at once. But on his way he had to cross a bridge, and on the bridge stood a man with a rope tied around his waist. The man with the rope tied around his waist spoke to the traveler. He said, “Pardon me, but could you do me a favor?”

“I have an important appointment,” the traveler replied.

“It’s just a small favor,” the man with the rope said.

“Well, all right,” the traveler agreed.

The man with the rope proceeded to hand the traveler the end of the rope that was not tied around his waist. And before the traveler could stop him, he leaped off the side of the bridge. With all his strength, the traveler managed to hold on and keep the other man crashing to his death in the canyon below.

When he recovered from the shock, the traveler looked over the edge and saw the other fellow dangling near some girders supporting the bridge.

“Grab on to one of the girders and climb to safety,” the traveler called out.

“No,” answered the man dangling below.

“But I must get to my appointment,” the traveler explained.

“But I need you,” replied the other man. “Please don’t let go.”

Friedman ends his parable there and asks us to recognize that it is a scene played out again and again in life. Guilt is one of the ways we weave webs of dependency – one of the ways we get others to take responsibility for us and for our problems, instead of taking responsibility ourselves. And we let others use guilt to keep us from discovering and doing what God calls us to do.

But beyond the human use and abuse of guilt, there is yet another way in which guilt can get out of hand. And this brings us back to our text and to our discussion of the human heart. Let me read again one of my favorite texts: “And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts and God knows everything.”

This text is for those who, in spite of their formal acceptance of God’s forgiveness, continue to struggle with a sense of guilt and unworthiness so deep that it paralyzes them with anxiety and despair. Some hearts may

be conquered by the power of evil through the presence of wrong desires – greed, lust, covetousness. But the power of evil conquers other hearts by binding it in cords of guilt.

For these hearts, the good news is this: God is greater than our hearts. We are called upon to trust God more than we trust our feelings. We are called upon to follow not our hearts, but Jesus Christ.

Ben Patterson tells a story about mountain climbing that helps us understand how this works. Once, as a beginner, Patterson scaled a steep mountain with two friends who were expert climbers. Ignoring their advice, he got himself stuck on the side of a glacier. His friends found him, and one of them chipped two little toe-holds in the glacier, so that Ben could get from where he was to safety.

Then the two experts gave him instructions: “Ben, you must step out from where you are and put your foot where the first foothold is. When your foot touches it, without a moment’s hesitation swing your other foot across and land it on the next toe hold. When you do that, reach out and we will pull you to safety. But listen carefully – as you step across, do not lean into the mountain! If anything, lean out a little bit.

Otherwise, your feet might fly out from under you and you will fall.”

Patterson explains, “When I am on the edge of a cliff, my heart tells me to lie down and hug the mountain, to get as close to it as I can, to become one with it, not to lean away from it. But my good friends were telling me to do the opposite of what my heart was telling me. I looked at them real hard. I thought to myself, is there any reason, any reason at all, not to trust them? I could not think of one. So, for a moment, based solely on my faith in the good sense and good will of my friends, I stifled the inner voice telling me to cling to the mountain.”

Patterson did not follow his heart. He followed the word of his trustworthy friends. And because he did, he lived to tell the story.

There are times in all of our lives when our faith is tested, and we must choose between the inner voices and what we have heard from God and claim to believe. This I know – there is no more trustworthy friend than God. When God says, “Count the cost” and “turn the other cheek” and “Take up your cross” and “Wash one another’s feet,” we should do it, despite what the little voices in our hearts and heads might be saying. And when God says, “My grace is sufficient for you, you are forgiven,” we ought to celebrate it, regardless of the inner voices whispering guilt and despair.

“Following your heart” may always work in the movies. But in real life, it can lead you astray in more ways than one. And when it comes to where we stand with God, it is good to remember, “God is greater than our hearts.”

We are forgiven.
Amen.