

"The Heart of the Matter"
Reformation Sunday C 2023
October 29, 2023
John 8:31-36
(Sermon by the Reverend Michelle Manicke)

"Always lead with your heart." That's the message that came to me as I was praying for direction for preaching. "Always lead with your heart." "Amen!," I thought. "But, Spirit, what exactly does that mean for your people?" ...After sitting with this and pondering for a while, I felt prompted to ask myself, "What's on my heart right now?" And as soon as I opened the door to that question, all the things came flooding in, and all the tears came flooding out.

You see, friends, there are so many people on my heart right now. Indeed, my heart is like a tapestry of sorrow woven and intertwined with strands of love and strands of joy. The tears hiding behind the curtains of my eyelids, awaiting any cue to make their appearance, testify to the fullness of my heart...and to the fullness of my plate.... I share this with you because I know something similar is true for many of you, as well. And I think it's also important to keep in mind that we, the people of God here at Zoar Lutheran Church, aren't alone in feeling overwhelmed and underequipped in the face of so much heartbreak. Take a look around and you'll see what I mean: Across the street and around the world, the hearts of God's children are crying out for healing and for hope. From our houseless neighbors here in Clackamas County to the shooting victims and their loved ones in Lewiston, Maine; from hurricane-battered Mexico to earthquake-flattened Afghanistan; from war-torn Ukraine to the desecrated and decimated Holy Land, the children of God are crying out for healing and for hope....

As I was pondering all these things in my heart, I recalled something I once heard former Oregon Synod Bishop Dave Brauer-Rieke say. I was entering a gathering of rostered leaders that was already in progress, and as I stepped through the door, Bishop Dave was saying, "If you're not grieving, you're not paying attention...." I remember thinking to myself, "Whoa! Spot on, Bishop!" You see, in that moment I was acutely aware of the ever-widening circles of grief in which all of us exist, for I was grieving a lot of things. including my mother's declining health and the struggles of our young adult children. I was also grieving with the members of the congregation where I was serving at the time. As their companion in Christ, I grieved as I walked with them through the dark valleys of broken relationships, debilitating disease, and the unfathomable loss that comes in the wake of a loved one's death. At the very same time, I was also experiencing a more global grief for our children and our children's children in this world of deep division and unrepentant self-centeredness. And layered into the mix was the ever-present grief for our neighbors, both human and non-human, who are groaning in pain and crying for mercy, while God's beautiful, yet fragile creation staggers under the oppressive yoke of greed and climate change....

So, today I feel nudged to borrow Bishop Dave's words and direct them at us, the members and friends of Zoar Lutheran Church: "If you and I aren't grieving, we're not paying attention." That's the truth, and it's a hard truth — no doubt about it! And because it's a hard truth, we human beings often try to resist it because – let's face it -- grieving hurts. A lot!...

Grieving makes us feel angry and helpless, and — doggone it! - -we just can't afford to let it sap what little energy we have left. So, sometimes we give in to the temptation to turn our backs and run away.... I get it, friends; I really do! Like you, I've been there and done that...and yet I've also come to see that there's no escape, because wherever we go, the grief and the pain will go with us. Like unchecked baggage, they'll continue to weigh us down, and if we don't deal with our grief and pain, eventually they'll drag us down.... The truth is, in order to receive the healing and hope we so desperately need, each of us must turn and face our grief. We must sit with it for a while, and eventually we must embrace what our grief has to teach us. If we don't, we'll never be free to lead with our hearts, and we'll never be free to receive the wholehearted, abundant life God desires to give us....

These days, as your companion in Christ here at Zoar, I grieve with all of you, as you grieve your losses, both personal and corporate. At this very moment, I'm grieving the declining health of our friend, Curt, who just went on hospice yesterday. My heart also breaks for a young adult I know, who's living with multiple health issues. I also grieve for another person who's succumbing much too young to the ravages of Alzheimer's. And to acknowledge the proverbial elephant in the room, I'm acutely aware that many of you, the members and friends of Zoar, are grieving in the aftermath of last Sunday's narrow vote to discontinue hosting the emergency weather shelter on Zoar's property. As your pastor, I know that you are all deeply caring, servant-hearted people, so this isn't a decision that was taken lightly.... As I said in the letter I sent out to the congregation on Tuesday evening, even though we all recognize that shelter ministries are vital and much needed in our community, the unfolding of events and interactions over time has led many of us to discern that Zoar simply isn't a compatible location for shelter ministries.... Friends, no matter how you voted, as your pastor, I grieve with all of you because you and I are the Body of Christ, and when one member of the Body suffers, all suffer together with it.¹

Now, since we live in a "suck-it-up-buttercup" kind of world, I want to say a little bit more about grief. I think we all know that grief is a normal human response to loss, and there's no single "right way" to grieve any loss. Each of us will grieve differently. While some will cope with their grief by diving into action, others among us are still feeling hurt, betrayed, and angry with our siblings in Christ. We need some time to rest and tend our wounds, which are still quite raw, before we can even begin to muster the energy to move forward. Still others among us are feeling an uneasy mixture of sorrow, pain, relief, and anxiety, and we aren't quite sure what to do with all these conflicting emotions.

To recap, here at Zoar, we've experienced a significant loss with the cessation of our shelter ministry. Some of you are also aware of yet another loss: The Sunday dinner crew has decided to suspend the Sunday community dinner, which was born in 2020 out of a desire to help our neighbors during the pandemic. Again, we're all grieving, and there are multiple layers to our grief. As your pastor, I, too, am grieving, and it's especially painful for me to sit here with all of you in the midst of the wounded Body of Christ, knowing I can't "fix" this by myself. I need your help, and we all need God's help....

¹ 1 Corinthians 12:26.

So, let's look at today's gospel reading to see what we can learn. In John 8, Jesus is talking to some folks who have something in common with you and me: They've come to believe in him. And yet Jesus wants them — and us — to know that believing is by no means the end of the story. In fact, believing is only the beginning of our life-long journey of following Jesus in the way of faith.... Now, you and I know that Jesus never minces any words, does he?! On the contrary, he always gets right to the point, telling his world-be disciples, "It's up to you! The road ahead isn't always going to be easy, but if you continue in my Word — that is, if you abide in my Word -- you will come to know the truth, and the truth will set you free...." In other words, Jesus is saying to his disciples of every time and every place, "Whatever you do, don't give up on God, because the truth is: God, who is Love, loves you deeply, and God will never, ever give up on you! So, hold onto your faith, hold onto each other, and let God's love hold onto you because that's what will help you get through the wilderness and come out on the other side, in a place of healing and new life...."

"Always lead with your heart," That's the message the Spirit gave me to share with you today, my friends. So, I invite you to join me in responding to the Spirit's invitation by asking God to help and guide us, so that the Body of Christ may be healed and we may be set free to share the abundant grace we have so freely received.

Let us pray.

God of grace,
You are the Potter,
and we are the clay.
We give you thanks for Jesus,
who reveals your great love
for us and for the whole world.

Help and guide us, Holy Spirit,
that we may abide in your Truth
and be set free
from the bonds of broken relationships
and from the clutches of death.

Help and guide us, Spirit,
so that we don't try to control
the things you are meant to control.
Set us free,
that we may grow in love for you
and for this broken, yet beautiful world
you love so deeply. Amen.