



SERMONS THAT WORK

Easter 5 (B)

May Your Heart Live for Ever!

[RCL] Acts 8:26-40; Psalm 22:24-30; 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8

The psalm selection for today, a portion of Psalm 22, can catch us by surprise.

Psalm 22 is famously associated with Holy Week. Jesus, suspended from the cross, close to death, quotes its opening words: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” And here we have it in the Easter season.

But this psalm takes unexpected turns, as many psalms do, and by the time we reach today’s portion, the final seven verses, the tone is decidedly different, even serene and triumphant.

Let’s focus on a single one of these verses. Like a global map, it is small in itself, yet sets forth an entire world, a world well worth our exploration. The verse to keep in mind is this: “The poor shall eat and be satisfied, and those who seek the Lord shall praise him: ‘May your heart live for ever!’”

As part of a psalm selection for the Easter season, this verse summons us to consider how it sets forth the consequences of the resurrection of Christ. But what is going on in this small verse? In a word, celebration! Celebration sparked by the manifest generosity of God. People who are poor, afflicted, hungry; people who are humble, spiritual seekers—they will have their desires met.

There is no reason here to distinguish between hunger for daily bread and hunger for spiritual bread, for God supplies them both. God supplies to the point of satisfaction; there will be no shortage, but plenitude. Humble spiritual seekers, eager to encounter God—they will experience satisfaction. They will not have to settle for consolation prizes but will see God face-to-face as a friend and will respond with endless praise.

This verse is a prophecy of nourishment and vision, nourishment provided by God in the sight of God—and finds fulfillment in Christ’s resurrection.

These great fifty days of Easter recall the appearances of our risen Lord, yes, but Easter extends far beyond this, for it contains as well a reliable promise of both nourishment for all the afflicted, the feeding of hungry hearts, plus an ever-expanding vision of God that incites endless praise. The church’s entire journey

throughout history and beyond and the journey of every single Christian amounts to an extension of Easter.

How can this be? Consider today's gospel: Jesus the vine, ourselves as the branches. The Jesus Movement spreads across the earth, moves throughout time, bears abundant fruit. The poor are fed from soup kitchens and from resplendent altars. Don't separate these two, for the same Christ feeds the hungry from both. Seekers meet God and they praise God; praising God, they desire God still more. This pair of actions, the seeking and the praising, are not separate, but responses to the one who satisfies us yet renews our desire.

The psalmist sets this forth as a prophecy. Its reality is ours because of Easter: the one resurrection life in heaven as on earth.

But our small verse is not yet done, and neither are we, my friends. The verse concludes with something said by an unnamed voice: "May your heart live for ever!"

This exclamation sounds like a toast, an exclamation of well-wishing extended to everyone when glasses are lifted up. "May your heart live for ever!" Who pronounces this toast remains unclear to us. Perhaps it is God.

"May your heart live for ever!" Here is one of those scriptural declarations that from a certain angle says everything that can be said, everything we need to hear. If we understand this declaration, we require nothing more.

"May your heart live for ever!" For us to have this ordinary, earthly existence, it is necessary for the heart, that organ in our chest, to live. When it sickens, we are impaired. When it expires, then we are dead. We know this to be true.

On an even deeper level, we know that our heart, the core of our existence, must be alive if we are to live. People sometimes walk around with dead hearts; they are dead to God, other people, the earth, and even themselves. Their hearts have become stone, and in all the ways that matter, they are as insensate as stone. And so, throughout Scripture, God keeps asking us to trade our stone hearts for hearts of flesh; the faithful keep calling out for God to place inside them new and living hearts.

We can look beyond this scriptural language to something based upon it. For consider this: all the devotional and liturgical and formational equipment of Christianity, sermons and icons and creeds, hymns and songs and anthems, sacraments and prayers and processions, prayer beads and crosses and vigorous AMENs, the entirety of this apparatus in its splendor and variety and insistence, it all serves one grand purpose: to keep our hearts from becoming hard, to keep our hearts from going dead, and when they do, to restore and resurrect them through the one way available, which is the mercy of God. The whole blessed

deal is simply this: The Holy One takes away your heart of stone and gives you a heart of flesh, and does this time and again, as often as it needs to happen.

“May your heart live for ever!” Hear this primary toast at Christ’s banquet, for above all else our hearts need to live, and when they live forever, then they are hearts amply nourished, hearts that beat in the presence of God and according to the rhythm of divine life.

“May your heart live for ever!” This blessing appears in the Psalter, but we are not told who bestows it. But we can speak it now to one another, we can greet one another with these words, for this is the prayer that God almighty offers on our behalf and is doing everything to fulfill.

When we live here and now with fleshy hearts rather than stone hearts, then good things happen. Our single verse from Psalm 22 reveals some of them.

The poor shall eat and be satisfied. When we have hearts of flesh, we recognize the poor surrounding us, those afflicted in many ways, and we want them to enjoy food that will sustain them. And so, we work and we pray and we give because there is love in our hearts. We even take risks for justice, for as Cornel West says, “Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public.” AMEN!

Those who seek the Lord shall praise the Lord. When we have hearts of flesh, we recognize all around us people seeking the Lord whether or not they know it, whether or not they are walking in the right direction. We want those who seek to find, and those who find to praise. And so, we work and we pray and we give because there is love in our hearts. We take some risks for mercy, remembering that mercy has been shown to us. AMEN!

“May your heart live for ever.” This is God’s prayer for us. May we pray it on our own behalf and for one another. This prayer is where Easter takes us. AMEN!

May your heart live for ever!

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