

SLD04.02.06 Fifth Sunday in Lent
Jeremiah 31:34; Psalm 51:1-12, John 12:20-33
Emory Presbyterian Church
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“The Wisdom of the Secret Heart”

Okay, so what with everything going on this morning – our minute for mission for the Children’s Chaplain’s department, our wonderful guest chorus, the reception of new members, communion, I’m aware I need to talk fast and keep it short this morning. Problem is, today’s teaching is, as usual during this season of Lent, a sort of tough one. One that doesn’t easily bear the glare of directness without degrading into platitude, the fate that awaits so many of Jesus’ sayings – you know, a seed has to die for the plant to bear fruit; those who love their life will lose it, the first will be last – that sort of thing.

In fact, what I think Jesus is trying to at in today’s Johannine text is a certain way of looking at the world; a certain way of looking at pain and suffering, and loss, that requires a certain wisdom, maybe even the ‘wisdom of the secret heart’ alluded to in the first two of today’s texts.

Almost sounds gnostic, doesn’t it, the wisdom of the secret heart? As if it’s only available to some people but not to others? But I don’t think Jeremiah or the psalmist or Jesus are referring to any sort of esoteric knowledge that’s only available to a special few. They’re just talking about a very internal knowledge, an inner confidence, if you will, a kind of ‘heart-knowing’ versus ‘head-knowing,’ if you understand the difference. Not the kind of knowledge that can be gained by study, but that’s given through revelation, most often, regrettably, through the experience of suffering. And by nature, this kind of knowledge *is* always given;

that is, it can't be earned or taken but is always a gift. In fact, I'd say it's one of the most precious gifts given to a life of faith.

But the wisdom of the secret heart that I think Jesus is getting at in today's passage, it's hard to get at efficiently. I mean, Jesus didn't. The Greeks ask him what's going on and he starts rambling about seeds and fruit and loving and hating and keeping and letting go and...he probably wasn't too concerned that we've got a Worship Ministry meeting at 12ish, and lot of folk are already hungry for Sunday lunch, and there's only so long you can hold the attention of a body who's been partying on Saturday night.

So enough intro already – we'd better get on with it, because in order to understand the wisdom of the secret heart, we gotta start way back with God's early plan for getting and keeping the attention of the faithful.

Back when God chose the Jews and made a covenant with them, God forthwith sketched out an elaborate set of rules and regulations designed to order Jewish life in such a way as to keep the chosen people conscious of their new covenantal relationship. And, as plans go, it was as good as any.

First God sort of top-lined those rules on the tablets God gave to Moses. But soon it became apparent that daily life really did require a bit more specificity. So God fleshed out more detailed SOPs (Standard Operating Procedures) which included what to eat, how to wash, whom to love, when to love and *where* to love, how to worship, what to sacrifice and so forth. You know - most of Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. It's a very thorough code of faith and

practice God offers the Jews that, when adhered to, provided excellent conditions for a life of remembrance of the blessing of God.

But...you know how people are.... Folks kept missing the point. And not just the ones who *didn't* keep God's law, but even some of the ones who *did*. It's not as if God's aiming for a bunch of law-abiding automatons who go through levitical motions. Heck, no! What God offers is love, and what God wants back from God's chosen people is love. In return for the gift of the heart of God, God wants back the heart of God's beloved ones – their *whole* heart.

And so, according to Hebrew scripture, God gets frustrated. A lot.

Which is where we find ourselves in Jeremiah's text this morning, right smack in front of a very frustrated God who's just about had it with the current relationship with Israel and who wants, is *determined*, to figure out some better approach.

"The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah." And I can tell you it's not going to be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand and brought them out of Egypt and gave them a slew of rules to live by, 'cause *that* approach sure didn't work. Those folks forgot all about how I saved them from slavery, and broke our covenant and, well, I'm going at it differently, this time," says God. *This* time what I'm going to do is reach right past all that Levitical code to the very *heart* of humanity and I'm going to put my law *within* them. I'm going to write my law of love – no, wait a minute – forget about *writing* – I'm going to flat chisel my law of love right onto their internal organs so nary a

one of their thoughts or actions can wander by without being reminded of the Alpha and Omega of my existence. And then, surely *then*, I will be their God and they will be my people. Surely *then*, all shall know me, from the least of them to the greatest.

And just what was it that God chiseled on the hearts of God's beloved ones?

I hear the answer in the words of today's psalmist when he declares to God, "You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart, O God." In my inmost being, God, teach me that wisdom of yours that is deeper than confession, deeper than obedience, deeper than suffering, deeper even than death. Teach me that wisdom, asks the psalmist, that lets even crushed bones, the bones *you* have crushed, O God, the wisdom that lets even those crushed bones rejoice.

Okay. Now fast forward to the Passover festival in Jerusalem in today's passage from John, wherein some Greeks - read 'non-Jews,' read 'pagans,' read 'outsiders' - approach the disciple Philip with the wish to speak with Jesus. Now Philip is either a martinet or just plain ole Presbyterian, because upon hearing the Greeks' request, he joins with Andrew to form a committee to study it, and only then schedules a plenary meeting with Jesus to let him know the Greeks' request for an audience.

Now Jesus, on the other hand, gets straight to the point, straight to the heart of what the Greeks want to know, which is what the heck Jesus is about.

“So here’s the deal,” says Jesus. “God’s fixin’ to glorify me (I’m the Son of God, you see) only it’s not going to look like *they* (he points to the insiders) think glorification looks like. In fact, what happens to me may not look much like glory to you, either, unless you happen to be able to regard me through the lens of the law of love God chiseled on the hearts of God’s chosen ones way back when, which is unlikely since you’re pagan and God’s chosen ones don’t even get it.

But if they did, they’d understand, and maybe you will, too, that God’s law of love leads to a different way of looking at the world; it leads to the wisdom of the secret heart. Which is the kind of wisdom some farmers have, and some parents, and some poor people, and some of the broken hearted – like how a grain of wheat has to die before it bears any fruit. Or how people who hang on so tightly to life as they know it, they strangle it to death. Or how the ones who are able to loosen their grip a touch seem to walk this earth a little lighter.”

Can you see Jesus’ inquiring look at his listeners? “Outsiders, insiders, is this ringing any bells for you?”

“If not, well, let’s just say that I’m fixin’ to die a miserable death and leave it at that. But if your heart is recognizing something here, then I’ll let you in on a little secret,” says Jesus. “God’s going to reach right into the heart of death and pull life out of it. In fact, *that’s* how God’s going to glorify me.

I know it sounds weird, and paradoxical, and counter-intuitive, this peculiar, God-chiseled, heart-law that pairs loving with losing, and hating with keeping; that glorifies suffering and makes of death the surest source of authentic life. Perhaps that’s why, on that Passover day in Jerusalem, only some

of the people around Jesus hear the voice of an angel, while others hear thunder,
and still others, nothing at all.

But what I want to know is, what do *you* hear?

To the glory of God. Amen.