

The Heart of God Psalm 108 & John 17:6-19

Seventh Sunday of Easter/ 12th May 2024

I'm struck by how the lectionary links Psalm 108 and John 17, often called Jesus' Priestly Prayer. While John 17 is missing the word "heart," both texts lead into the heart of things, the heart of life. Indeed, in Jesus' prayer, he shares the hopes and aspirations of his heart for his disciples, bearing his heart, as it were, to God. It's a prayer that leads us straight into the heart of God, into the heart of God's desires for us and the world.

Throughout the Psalms, we find approximately 127 references to the heart. The heart matters to the psalmist, and it matters to God. Psalm 4:7 declares, "You have put gladness in my heart." Psalm 9:1 proclaims: "I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds." Here's Psalm 27:3: "Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear." The psalmist cries in Psalm 108: "My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast; I will sing and make melody. Awake, my soul! Awake, O harp and lyre! I will awake the dawn." (Ps. 108:1-2). What a beautiful image. The heart alive. The heart in praise. Resonating with the heart of God. The heart active and engaged, eager, ready to "awake the dawn." What an image: hearts awaking the dawn.

The heart is viewed throughout scripture as more than simply an organ pumping blood. It's the center of one's personality, the core of one's being. The heart symbolizes one's sense of self. Having a healthy heart is essential to a life of faith. If the heart is not right with God, then something is wrong. If our hearts are devoted to other gods instead of the Living God, then our hearts are betraying us; then the heart is broken, fragmented, alienated, and cut off from its deepest desires. God wants our hearts and wants our hearts to desire after God. To say that God wants our hearts means that God wants more than part of our lives – more than empty religiosity or piety when it's convenient or simply good behavior – God desires the heart of our lives, the center of who we are, all that we are. Psalm 27 cries out, "'Come,' my heart says, 'seek his face!' Your face, LORD, do I seek. Do not hide your face from me" (27:8). The psalmist makes this extraordinary claim: not only does God want our hearts, but also that the heart also wants God. St. Augustine's (354-430) well-known prayer captures this best when he confessed, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee, O Lord."

This idea has always been at the center of Christian discipleship. When John Wesley (1703-1791), the founder of Methodism, first became a Christian in Oxford, England, he said that his "heart was strangely warmed." Methodists today love to talk about the heart strangely warmed; sometimes it's a running joke among Methodists. When the General Conference of the United Methodist Church recently lifted the ban on LGBTQ clergy and same-sex weddings, I sent a text to one of my best friends, Chuck Coblenz, a Methodist pastor in New Jersey, who was in my class at Princeton Seminary. I said, "Yay, Methodists. My heart was strangely warmed today." And he replied to me, "I didn't know that could happen to Calvinists." So I reminded him that John Calvin (1509-1564) had a heart. Unfortunately, many think of Calvin as more head than heart. Calvin's conversion, actually, was very similar to Wesley's. The depth of Calvin's conversion is beautifully symbolized by the logo he created for himself. It's the image

of a heart resting on an upturned open-faced palm, offered up to God. Above the image of the heart is a flame, a heart on fire for God, offering the passion of the heart, the core of his being, to God. And he included these words: *Prompte et sincere in opere domini*. Promptly and sincerely in the work of the Lord.

Both Wesley's and Calvin's experiences are rooted in the Biblical understanding that the desire to seek after God is first an experience of the heart. It's not only an intellectual exercise (although we need to place our intellects in service to God); it's essentially a matter of the heart. It comes from the center of who we are. God wants our hearts. And God desires to draw us into God's heart so that our hearts might be aligned with the heart of God. Alive within the rhythm of that resonance, heart-to-heart, we come alive and discover what is being asked of us.

We are given a window into what that resonance looks and feels like in Jesus' prayer in John 17. John allows us to listen in on a moment of deep personal intimacy between Jesus and God. Jesus is drawn toward and into the heart of God. And there's something about how he's praying, in the way John recounts the prayer, that pulls us in along with Jesus into the heart of God. We see why Jesus was sent into the world and why he sends us into the world, and what is God's hope and desire for the world. Jesus wants our hearts firmly rooted in God's desire and hope for the world because he knows what we need.

As Jesus prepares the disciples for his departure, he's praying for their hearts—and for ours. Note that Jesus doesn't want to take them with him. Jesus doesn't ask that they be taken out of the world. All he asks is that the disciples be protected from the evil one or, simply, evil. "I have given them your word," Jesus prays, "and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking that you take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one" (Jn. 17:14-15).

It's essential to know here and elsewhere in John's Gospel, "the world" doesn't mean the created order or creation. This might be a little confusing. Let me try to explain. Behind the English word "world" in John's Gospel is the Greek word *kosmos*. World or *kosmos* in John refers to something very specific. The *kosmos* is understood as a force within the created order, within creation, that is at odds with God's hopes and dreams for creation. The *kosmos* works against God's vision of love and grace, justice and healing. *Kosmos* is a force within creation that binds us, holds us back, and alienates us from God. Those who are being shaped by this anti-God force belong to the *kosmos*, belong to the world.

We see this use most profoundly in John 3:16 and 17. With this particular understanding of *kosmos*, the significance of these verses and, indeed, Jesus' entire ministry take on a deeper meaning. "For God so loved the *kosmos* (i.e., that which is against God) that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the *kosmos* to condemn the *kosmos*, but in order that the *kosmos* might be saved through him." The *kosmos* needs to be saved.

The Son was sent in love by God to redeem the *kosmos* so that the *kosmos* itself can be transformed as the dwelling place of God. This hope is expressed in Revelation 11:15, "The kingdom of this world (*kosmos*), has become the kingdom of his Lord and of his Messiah, and he

will reign for ever and ever.” The *kosmos* is in the process of becoming the kingdom of God. Jesus’ disciples do not belong to the *kosmos*. Jesus doesn’t even ask that we be taken out of the *kosmos*, but only that we be protected from the work of the evil one. His disciples don’t belong to the *kosmos*, even as Jesus doesn’t belong to the *kosmos*. We live in the *kosmos*, but not of the *kosmos*.

But Jesus, like God, loves the *kosmos*, even though the *kosmos* put him on a cross. We could say that God has a heart for the *kosmos* and seeks its redemption—as should we. That’s why God sent Jesus. And that’s why Jesus gathered up disciples, students, who would learn from him. And that’s why Jesus then sent his students out to continue this work—because there is work to be done, and God needs our hearts to be in it! Jesus prayed, “As you have sent me into the *kosmos*, so I have sent them into the *kosmos*” (Jn. 17:18).

This is a remarkable prayer. It’s a sending prayer. A commissioning prayer. A missional prayer. Jesus is sending them—sending us—out to face the *kosmos*, to continue God’s redemptive work, with hearts on fire! He’s sending us into the fray! He’s sending us toward the enemy.

Who or what is the enemy? Everything that resists God’s redemptive love and mercy. Everything that is evil, destructive, and demonic. Everything that breeds hate and fear. Everything that divides and alienates us from ourselves, one another, and from God. Everything that dehumanizes. Everything that kills. Everything that resists resurrection. Everything that hinders mercy and grace and forgiveness and healing. All this is the *kosmos*. The *kosmos* is everything that questions, denies, rejects, or pushes against the power of God’s love. Jesus is sending us out to wage love in the *kosmos*! For all of it is to be redeemed. And Jesus entrusts us with this work and trusts us. Jesus’ prayer is that we know ourselves loved and equipped and sent into the *kosmos* to bear witness to God’s redeeming love, the power of resurrection, the abundant life that God gives us, life touched by eternity. That’s what eternal life is in John’s Gospel: life touched by eternity, life shaped by the eternal, by God.

All of this means we can face the future with confidence and trust. The German theologian Jürgen Moltmann reminds us, “The original attitude for prayer...was to stand with outstretched arms, open face, and wide-opened eyes, the stance showing a readiness to go or leap forward.”¹ Go to Rome, go down into the catacombs, go to some of the oldest churches in the city. You won’t find crosses. Instead, you’ll find a variety of symbols and images, including frescoes and carvings of both women and men standing with outstretched arms—the Orantes posture—standing with eyes wide-opened, praying, with open hearts. Hearts, in prayer, that are being stretched open to the heart of God. The orientation of Jesus’ priestly prayer is toward the future, looking ahead with confident expectation. Knowing that Jesus prays for us, we, too, are ready to go and leap forward into the future God is preparing for us, with hearts awaking the dawn of God’s New Age, God’s New Creation!

¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Living God and the Fullness of Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 173.