

Thoughts and Intentions of the Heart

Hebrews 4:12-16

Indeed, the word of God is living and active,
sharper than any two-edged sword,
piercing until it divides soul from spirit,
joints from marrow;
it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

And before God no creature is hidden,
but all are naked and laid bare
to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

Since, then, we have a great high priest
who has passed through the heavens, Jesus,
the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession.

For we do not have a high priest
who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses,
but we have one who in every respect
has been tested as we are, yet without sin.

Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness,
so that we may receive mercy
and find grace to help in time of need.

Thoughts and Intentions of the Heart

October 13, 2024

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I.

I would like to begin today by sharing with you a couple of realizations I had this week. Monday, when I got to my office, I hit the ground running and spent most of the day planning all the worship services between now and the start of Advent. The first step of which is selecting the scripture reading for each Sunday upon which the sermon will be based, along with what I *think* the theme of that sermon will be based on what is happening in the our church, the world, and my heart.

Starting with these ensuing October Sundays I found I kept choosing topics and issues based primarily on the heaviness I have been feeling about my brother Paul, which was on full display in last week's sermon. That was my first realization.

II.

Then I moved into November. The first Sunday was a no brainer, as it will be Pledge Sunday and the topic is pretty self-evident. Beyond that, however, I decided that it was a fool's errand to pick sermon topics *now* and expect them to hold up *after* the General Election on November 5th which will determine our nation's next President. If the past is any predictor, my assumption is that we have some tumultuous times ahead of us. That was my second realization.

I suspect that, like me, most people are trying very hard to *not* think too much about the presidential election. At same time, though, it seems a safe bet that most of you join me in having it play in the background of one's mind all the time.

III.

While my *personal* political slant is probably not too difficult to ferret out, I try very hard to keep politics out of the pulpit; which, I am aware, is appreciated. However, my efforts to honor the demarcation between church and state is less about propriety (why start now) and more about not muddling the message which matters most; i.e., the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

That said, sometimes one has to call it the way one sees it, so today I am going to dip our toes into politics just a *wee* bit. Tuesday was something of a wash for me as I had to drive over to Burlington for a six month check-up with my Endocrinologist (all good, excellent actually). Needing to leave quite early in the morning, I did only a brief scan of the day's news with a quick cup of coffee. One headline I noticed, but did not have time to pursue, was a meteorologist asserting the absurdity of trying to control the force and fury of a hurricane.

IV.

As the people of Florida know all too well owing to the quick succession of hurricanes, first Helene and now Milton, there is a *heck* of a lot energy contained within these Category 4 and, now, Category 5 storms (I am aware of at least a few of our parishioners, like John Goetze, and Dan & MaryGrace Gordon who live directly in Milton's path). Though it might seem a little crazy and somewhat far-fetched to imagine controlling the power of a hurricane, when I saw the headline I assumed someone was thinking outside the box to reduce our dependance on fossil fuels (good on them).

However, after arriving home from Burlington, I was catching up with Linda on the day's events as is our habit; primarily what each of us did, and often having to do with the church. Occasionally, we will rehash the national news, if ever so briefly (see paragraph above). Which is when she informed me that the headline was actually referencing the belief that *one* political party was controlling the path of these hurricanes in order to hit the greatest concentration of voters from the *other* political party. WOW! How does one *arrive* at such a point?

V.

The scripture passage before us this morning is nothing less than fantastic; just chock full of things to ponder, question, and consider. Before we get to that, however, let us review the letter to the Hebrews which is a bit of an "odd Todd" compared to the other books of the New Testament.

Owing to sources both within the book (the mention of Timothy's imprisonment) and beyond the book (a reference to Hebrews by Clement of Rome) Hebrews is dated no earlier than 65 CE, and not later than 95 CE; making it one of the later books of the Bible. Though early scholars and

church leaders assigned authorship to the Apostle Paul, the author fails to self-identify as was Paul's practice, and the book deals with some markedly un-Pauline ideas. Most telling, though, the author distances himself from the first generation of believers, of which Paul was one.

VI.

Suffice to say, we do not know the authorship of Hebrews and never will. What we *do* know, is that Hebrews was written by a passionate believer. Owing to the complex concepts articulated, the obvious familiarity with Jewish scriptures, and the vocabulary and writing style which indicate a mastery of Greek language, we also know that the author was an intellectually astute, Hellenistic Jew. In short, Hebrews is the most well-written book in the New Testament canon.

Though no community or region is named, we also have a general knowledge about the audience to whom the book is written: like the author, they were Hellenistic Jews (or Hebrews, hence the book's name) but unlike the author, they were quite immature in their faith. As a whole, the audience suffered persecution from the authorities and/or larger society and, rather than simply being discouraged or weakened by sufferings, they were in danger of apostasy; from turning away from Christ entirely. In short, the stakes were high.

VII.

There are several areas into which we might delve today: that the Word of God is living and active; that we have a high priest who is able to sympathize with our weakness; and, that we are to approach the throne of grace with boldness so as to receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

While certainly germane, what I would instead call our intention to this day is the author declaring that the Word of God, the *Logos*, is sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow and, most significantly, judges the thoughts and intentions of the heart. That before the Word, no creature is hidden but *all* are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account. It is to this notion of the thoughts and intentions of the heart to which I would have us cast our gaze at a time and in a season such as this.

VIII.

In the Bible, the heart is not just where people have emotions. It is also where we think and have intention. Which is a more holistic way of understanding the human experience, uniting thoughts, intentions, and feelings in a single whole by putting them together in the same place, rather than seeing them as belonging to different regions. This serves to remind us that our thinking, our intentions, and our feelings *always* go together. Moreover, not only do they always go together, they also always work together to lead us *somewhere*.

Which is why the author of Hebrews is so concerned that the people to whom the letter is addressed are in danger of turning from Christ. When we cease to have the mind and heart of Christ, we inevitably turn to other things...like conspiracy theories. Which is how one can arrive at a point one actually starts to believe hurricanes can be controlled and directed with malevolence to impact a national election.

IX.

While most of us can read a news story about hurricanes being manipulated for political purposes and rightly recognize such crazy talk for what it is, the more troubling question is what are the thoughts and intentions which makes one receptive (or vulnerable) to not only believing such things, but *wanting* to believe such things? While it is certainly true that the wildfire machine which is the internet and social media serve to greatly exacerbate the situation, the truth is that down through the ages we humans have always found *incredibly* creative ways to distract and disillusion ourselves; sometimes with astounding implausibility. While Satan is rightly understood in the Bible as the Great Deceiver, the human tendency to *want* to be greatly deceived should shoulder the greater share of blame. Not only to we *want* to be deceived, we actively seek out deception until, finally, we tire of such an inefficient approach. Instead, we cut out Satan as middle man and begin to manufacture deception for own selves.

X.

Which begs two questions. First, why do we deceive ourselves? While some might argue for boredom, or anger, or fear, or envy as causation, in my experience it usually comes down to good old-fashioned laziness. Frankly, it

takes a lot of hard work to *not* be deceived. Especially these days, when fodder for deception is so readily available and in such great supply. Doing *nothing* is the easiest way to be deceived, and to deceive oneself. Which leads us to the second question, what can we *do* to prevent ourselves from being deceived?

Monday morning, while pondering these things as I planned worship for the fall, I became aware of noises out in the foyer, of the front door opening and closing, of quiet conversation and, off in the distance, I kept hearing laughter. Curious, I went to investigate and quickly discovered our church gardeners, Pat Mace and Faye Bartley joyfully at work up in the kitchen.

XI.

Instead of simply trim down the garden ahead of the coming winter, Faye and Pat cut the remaining flowers and used them to create a bevy of beautiful floral arrangements which they delivered to homebound members of our congregation that afternoon. WOW! How does one *arrive* at such a point? Answer: thoughts and intentions of the heart. Rather than doomscrolling the internet to glom on to the latest conspiracy theory with which to deceive themselves, Pat and Faye got off their.... patooties to trim petunias and bring them to the people we all love.



Not only do we find what we are looking for in life, we *create* the world we seek to find. What that life and world will look like and consist of is largely dependent on the nature and source of the thoughts and intentions we hold in our heart. If we look for darkness, we will surely find it and it will eventually find us. If we look for the light, we will find it; moreover, we will become bringers of the light. To others, and most assuredly to ourselves.

XII.

Though the mission of a church is multifold, one of the most important aspects which is seldom recognized is the role that the church has providing its people with opportunities to *not* be deceived. However, few of us have the same kind of green thumb as Pat and Faye, and there are only so many flowers to go around. Certainly, our regular Rummage Sales, fundraising dinners, and up-coming Bazaar, Noisy Can and Farm Family offerings, Church and Community Program, along with a slew of other initiatives provide ample opportunities to many, I would like to close today with a somewhat new opportunity to wipe away deception and, instead, bring light to ourselves and those around us: delivering hot, nutritious meals to folks living at the Senior Living High Rises here in the village through the Home Delivered Meals Program run by the St. Lawrence County Office for the Aging. Though we know her as our wonderful Church School Director, it turns out that Andrea Montgomery's "day job" is the Director of the Office for the Aging, and she is *fabulously* effective in the role.

XIII.

A few months back Andrea got talking with Linda about the great (dire, really) need for volunteers to help in the Home Delivered Meals program (strictly speaking, it is not "Meals on Wheels" which is a national brand, though they differ in name only; kind of like saying "Jello"). The Office for the Aging delivers meals to homes and provides them to others county-wide at congregate meal sites and kitchens located in Brasher Falls, DeKalb Junction, Gouverneur, Morristown, Ogdensburg, Potsdam, Star Lake and, yes, at the High Rises here in Canton.

While many at the High Rise enjoy these hot and nutritious meals in the company of others in the dining room, there are 13 people with chronic illness or disability who need them to be delivered to their apartment. Currently, our church is responsible for bringing meals to these folks on the Second Tuesday

of each month, with great thanks going to Jean McGuire, Joe and Mary Bean, Mary Christopher, and Linda Potter who have recently assumed this responsibility to provide not only meals, but also friendship and support as well.

XIV.

They sure could use a little help, though, and this is where *any* of you might come in. Few things in life are for certain, but I can *guarantee* you that if the thoughts and intentions of your heart lead you to help others, and you come to know the folks who require your help, you will arrive at a new, better, and much more hopeful point in your life, faith, and in how you view and understand the world. Such is the power of humility, gratitude, and service to transform any person as well as the people of this planet. *That* is the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ which must not be muddled.

We *all* have matters which bring heaviness to our lives, like the health of one's sibling and the sickness, grief, and misfortune of those we love, which hurt our heart, worry our mind, and tax our soul. We *all* feel troubled and overwhelmed but the upcoming election, and by national and world events which seem far beyond our control but which will affect us greatly. However, we must not let such things rule the thoughts and intentions of our hearts.

XV.

The author of Hebrews concludes today's text by saying: "*Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*" There is great need in this time. We have found the grace. Let us be bold in offering the mercy we discover to have received for ourselves through the thoughts and intentions of a Christ-like mind and heart. Amen.

If you would like to learn more about all aspects of the Office For The Aging's Nutrition Program, including Home Delivered Meals, listen to this 8 minute podcast episode featuring Andrea Montgomery and Linda Potter entitled, "[Picnic Basket](#)"; part of Hospice of St. Lawrence Valley's podcasting series, "[The Travelers Guide to Life](#)." Special thanks to Jonathan Brown, Director of Development and Community Relations at Hospice of SLV, for editing and making this podcast available ahead of its scheduled "Drop Date" specifically so it could be included in today's sermon.