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Ascension Sunday
Georgetown Presbyterian Church

June 2nd, 2019
Ephesians 1:15-23
Eyes of the Heart

“Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature...for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” That is the advice God gives to Samuel when he visits Jesse to select David as the future King of Israel. That Jesse’s older sons are the more obvious choices: taller, stronger, faster, more fighting experience, and better SAT scores. But to be a faithful leader of God’s peoples these metrics are less important. ‘Look upon the heart,’ says the Lord. And David, the handsome young shepherd boy was all heart.

There is something beautifully refreshing about this selection process – looking upon the heart. There are lots of references to the heart in the bible – even in the earliest stories in Genesis the people are known by the condition of their hearts, for better or worse. It is strange how a bodily organ has come to represent the seat of emotion, the center of character, the citadel of the soul. And yet there is no better word for what we mean when we speak of our inner workings. The Bible says the heart can be hardened. It can be grieved. Broken. Stirred. Enlightened. The heart, in this way, is malleable, pliable, and changing. God looks upon the heart – knows the heart – cares about the conditions of our hearts.

A minister at my home church used to ask the question, “How is your heart?” with great repetition. It became a question you could anticipate hearing from her and so you might as well prepare yourself to answer. To the logical, the analytical, the intellectual – it is a weird question, which should be asked only by ones cardiologist. Maybe God gets to ask us this question as well. God already knows the health and state of our inner lives and yet sometimes we are not always quite as in tuned with our own health. How is your heart? Hardened. Grieved. Broken. Stirred. Enlightened. Strong. Weary. Open. Anxious. Grateful. How is your heart?

Now I would like you to turn to the person next to you and answer this question – just kidding. I know about 50% would walk out immediately and the other 50% of you would begin drafting angry emails to me in your heads. This is not a flip question for casual conversation. It is a question that needs reflection, prayer, and discernment in order to answer it honestly. Yet, if God looks upon the heart and if the state of our hearts is a qualifier for service in the kingdom then it is a question we should be asking ourselves.

The writer of the letter to the Ephesians is also concerned about the state of the early Christians hearts. This letter was written in Paul’s name but most likely not by Paul. More likely it is written by a follower of Paul, someone who owed his own faith to Paul’s teachings about Jesus. Unlike Paul’s very personal letters to churches he knew and had visited personally, Ephesians is written by this

unknown author to a church community he had never visited - a stranger writing to a strange land. And so the letter, while not a personal letter to friends, not knowing their individual struggles is written more to the universal church. It is written as an outline of the Christian experience. And woven throughout the letter you find pieces of liturgy, and hymns, and prayers, and pastoral admonitions. It was meant to generally teach doctrine, encourage morality, and promote unity among Christians. Biblical scholar, Ralph Martin in his commentary on the epistles said that the letter to the Ephesians has the most contemporary relevance of any book in the New Testament.

In our passage from Ephesians today there is very dense theological language but there is an underlying message of a hope the writer has for these Christians, and in it we find the phrase, 'that the eyes of their hearts might be enlightened'. May the eyes of the heart be enlightened so they might see God's hope, and know God's power, and experience God's love – that was the authors wish for these unknown Christians. Maybe this is just another way of saying what Jesus said earlier, 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.' May the eyes of your heart be enlightened – so you might see God, and find faith, and live lives worthy of the callings you have been given.

On Tuesday, my five year old 'graduates' from preschool. I am supposed to write her a letter, which will be rolled up as a scroll and given to her on her last day as her diploma. It is supposed to be words of reflection, words of advice, and words of encouragement. She can't really read other than a few simple words so probably pictures of hearts and butterflies would be the best message for her on Tuesday. But to her future self, I would NOT tell her to work hard or study diligently or find her passion because with her Puritan DNA she will figure all of that out.

I might remind her about the young shepherd boy David and how he grew to become a brave servant of God. I would tell her that David, was not selected for God's service because he was the best or the biggest or the richest – but because God looked upon his heart and saw that he was good. God looks upon the heart and we should look upon the heart too. We should look upon the heart in the discernment of ourselves and of others. As we head out in the big bad world, aged five or eighty five, we know the temptations are at every corner, and evil is real, and trials have a way of finding us all. And so being strong in heart, pure in heart, enlightened in heart is the best defense against all the world will throw at us. That is the universal letter of encouragement to Christians. It is all about heart.

We return to the story of David and we know he rose to fame through his victory over the giant, Goliath. This is a biblical narrative that is often used in secular conversations to refer to the battles of the little verse the big. On the news you will hear it referred to as David and Goliath stories. The one lawyer against the big corporation. The sports underdog beating the reigning champion. The politician from the small town winning against the famous incumbent. But I have

to admit that the use of 'David and Goliath' as a secularized term bothers me because this was not just a story of little beating big. This was a story of profound faith in God and strength of heart.

Remember the young shepherd boy volunteered to fight the warrior Goliath. But King Saul, feeling quite concerned about the fate of the battle, dressed David in his own royal armor, with his shield and sword. David could not even walk in them, they were far too heavy for his small frame, and unfamiliar for his body to wear. He elected to take them off and approach Goliath with just his staff, slingshot, and five smooth stones. More importantly, he approached Goliath with his profound faith in God – heart and mind and soul and strength. David was armored.

David proclaims to Goliath, "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the LORD will deliver you into my hands, and I'll strike you down and cut off your head. This very day I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds and the wild animals, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel. All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the LORD saves; for the battle is the LORD's, and he will give all of you into our hands." David is armored; he is equipped. And this is the kind of defense we hope for ourselves and for those we love.

Interestingly, the writer of Ephesians uses the same image for the first Christians as he concludes his letter to them. "Finally be strong in the Lord and the strength of his power...Take up the whole armor of God, fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. Take the shield of faith. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit."

Our best defense against the world is not sword or spear or power or riches or glories but the enlightened eyes of the heart so we might discern true greatness, find real love, know inner peace, and faithfully pursue our callings. This is the writer's hope for the Ephesians, this is Jesus' desire for his disciples, and this is God's longing for each of us.

So just how is your heart?

Amen.