

Life Sunday Sermon 2015

Ezekiel 18:31-32 “Listen to the Heart”

Rev. Max Phillips, pastor of Christ Lutheran Church, Bouton, Iowa, chief executive officer of the Perry Lutheran Home, Perry, Iowa, and executive director of Lutheran Family Services, Fort Dodge, Iowa

www.lutheransforlife.org

“Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord God; so turn, and live” (Ezekiel 18:31-32).

Back in the 1980s a medical drama aired on television that was not as widely watched as it was critically acclaimed. It dedicated itself to getting not only characters developed, but also medical technology and jargon right. In one memorable episode, a man was critically injured and despite heroic efforts to save his life, he was declared brain dead. His grieving wife was presented with the option to give his organs for transplant and she compassionately gave her permission. Her husband was kept on life support, donor recipients were notified, and several hours of grueling waiting ensued for the wife as the procedures were completed. Late that same night, she asked to meet the wife of the person who had received her husband’s heart. In a sobbing embrace the two met, one with tears of grief, the other with tears of joy. The widow made one final request. She asked if she could go into the Intensive Care Unit and sit alone with the heart recipient for a few moments. The family consented and she entered into the small darkened room. With tears flowing from her eyes she gazed down at the unconscious patient. Then with tender care, she slowly placed her head on the patient’s chest and listened to her husband’s heart beating within a different man’s chest. Nothing was said. She wanted to hear for herself that part of her husband was still alive.

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Listening to the heart. That goes on in emergency rooms and care facilities every day across our land as doctors and nurses gauge life simply by that beating sound emanating from the chest. If you didn't know, a baby's heart begins its audible beat about 18 days into the pregnancy and that wonderful organ continues until the day that death occurs.

Listening to the heart goes on in almost every doctor's appointment, with physicians listening for any telltale signs of problem or illness. Listening to the heart is often a marvel for young children who place ears on each others' chest. Listening to the heart is a wonder to new moms and dads who all remember the day the ultrasound picked up not only the audible beat but also the image of their unborn child's pulsating heart. Listening to the heart is literally listening to life.

Life is what Creation was all about. "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters" (Genesis 1:1-2). If ever there was a time pregnant with expectation, this was it! God spoke to creation and it came to be. By the sixth day, all the preliminaries were complete and the pinnacle of it all waited. God was about to create the first man, Adam, and out of him later He would separate out the first woman, Eve. They were not just part of creation, they were the reason for it. Man's life was the sacred piece which gave sun, moon, planets, oceans, plants, animals, light and dark, and all other things their purpose. It was all about man. It was all about life.

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How things have changed!

Today creation itself is worshiped with plants and animals being given the same pinnacle role as man by the committee of society. The life of man is being reduced by creation's hunt to find a lesser place for him and certainly not at the center where God placed him. And in that hunt for its rightful place, mankind in its arrogance challenges the Creator's ownership of life. Pre-born babies, the elderly, and infirm are terminated by choice for reasons of convenience, cost, and comfort and that's not the half of it.

While beating hearts are good enough proof in medical circles for life, we know that it isn't good enough for God. The hearts he gave Adam and Eve were uncorrupt. They were perfect organs of life meant to beat eternally. In man's soul desire hid and when he acted on it, the victim was life itself. Adam's heart kept beating, but his soul was living only on a gracious promise. The same is the case for all people. Saint Paul clarifies that the great and terrible equalizer for the human race is now death because of sin. "[T]here is no distinction," he says, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:22b-23). We deserved nothing good from God and we should have been left to waste eternity's promise over the sad course of a human life span.

From a righteousness perspective, none of us can hear a heartbeat in our chest, because nothing good of our own beats there. This is where many people who care to believe something about God find in Him a distant being of anger and vengeance. They somehow listen to God's chest and find it silent for them. No life, no chance, no hope. And so with a fatalistic abandon they pursue the only dreams and life they can imagine,

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one focused on self, even if it is selfishly bent on doing good and serving earthly life.

Without God, human hearts have no other function than to beat toward death.

But listen to the heart of God.

Isn't it interesting that God chose to incarnate His Son into the form of a second Adam? Christ Jesus, like us, had a heartbeat early in His mother's pregnancy. He too had a heartbeat all throughout His life which fell silent after innocently enduring the tortures of the cross for our redemption. Some might say His death was premature. Nothing could be farther from the truth. His loving mission was to let His heart be stopped at a precise moment in time so that His life might be freely given in grace to make your beating heart pump with new life—His life.

Listening to the heart of God is what scripture is all about. Paul writes in Galatians, “And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ (Galatians 4:6). God chose the center of our life to be the place that His Spirit inhabits. It's what makes Baptism so special. There, in the water and by the Word, Jesus' heart is being washed into us. And there, in the water and by the Word, Jesus is personally holding us into God's original plan for the first man and the first woman. The plan that the Trinity has is simple: A wonderful communion of Creator and created, based on love from the Father, life from the Son, and care from His Spirit, all for you.

Have you stopped a beating heart? Perhaps you've done this quite literally or perhaps you've wanted to do this to someone or yourself. Maybe you've joined the world

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in wrongly challenging God and finding other life more precious than mans. God has a message for you. “Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel?” (Ezekiel 18:31). Confess your sins and admit that by them death has ruled you. Come clean on your selfish desires and you’ll be surprised. Before the echo of your confession stops, you’ll hear God’s beating heart in the words of the absolution. “[T]urn, and live” (Ezekiel 18:32), declares the Lord through the prophet Ezekiel. Your sins are forgiven! Your penalty canceled. Your shame and grief released. With loving kindness unknown anywhere else, Christ has made Himself your heart donor and you have new life. It comes with the highest worth but with no price. Listen to it not for new rules, but rather for God’s love for you.

Such a resurrection of your heart from the death of sin is real. After three days of silence in the tomb, Jesus’ heart started beating again and it beats still as He rules in heaven and walks with you in your new life given through faith at Baptism.

Your life will never end, even when your heart stops. God has graciously preserved you not as a perfect specimen, but instead as His perfectly loved one. And He has invited you to join your new heart with His to beat loudly with life and for life in this dead world. To speak up for the pre-born. To participate in the debate about life policy on all levels. To assist the elderly in persevering in life until their heart stops in the fullness of their time, however long that might be. To advocate for life even in the body’s suffering, pain, and distress. To do it all with your new, beating heart of love. Jesus said,

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"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you." (John 15:9a). It is true and He assures us that in faith we will remain in that love in this life and the next.

The woman entering into that hospital emergency room wanted to hear her husband's heartbeat with life one more time. We sinners put our ears to the Word and to the Sacrament for there it is impossible to miss the beat of our new, loving heart, sure evidence of the fullness of everlasting life that God has given us.

The world has changed when it comes to life, there is no doubt. But God has not changed His mind or His mercy. His Son's life is yours, now and forever! Listen to the heart of God and there you will find your life. In Jesus' Name, Amen!