

“Where Is Your Heart?”

Psalm 1:1-6

Preached from the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
Seventh Sunday in the Season of Easter, May 13, 2018

Mothers' Day
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I'm grateful our confirmation class is leading worship today. Perhaps you, “seekers” or “confirmands” have experienced something like this.

A mother knocks on her son's door on Sunday morning and says, “Good morning. Get up. It's time for church.”

She does this three times. On the fourth time, she knocks insistently and says, “It's time for church.”

The son says, “I don't want to go to church today.”

Mom says, “It's Sunday. Get up, get dressed, and get to church. You're fifty years old. And, besides, *you're the pastor!*”ⁱ

For many of us, our mother was or is one of those people who helps us to do the right thing. When we need a little encouragement, a little push, a special word—some Mom's have a special way of being there. Whatever the problem and whatever the question, my mom would tell me this: “Honey, you must follow your heart.”

In a round about way, that's what this Psalm is about. Let me explain.

Our reading today is from the first Psalm. And the First Psalm is, among other things, *The First Psalm*. It comes first and in that way sets the stage for all the Psalms that follow it. Psalm One is a sort of baseline Psalm. Some commentators call it a Torah-Psalm—because it points to the Torah, *the heart* of the Hebrew Bible.

On the surface of things, the Psalm is about choosing between doing good or doing evil. It's clear the choice the Psalmist is pointing us towards. *Happy are those who DO NOT follow the advice of the wicked*. Choose good. Don't choose bad.

Yes, and yes.

But the Psalm asks a deeper question. The Psalmist is asking this question, “Where is your heart?” And the Psalmist has a crystal clear idea of where our hearts should be: focused on God's word in scripture.

The righteous person is not righteous because he makes perfect decisions. The righteous person is not righteous because she is innately and morally “good.” No, *the righteous person is righteous because the righteous person stays focused on God's word*. Focus on God's word; meditate on God's word. God's word will enthuse you, perplex you, inspire you, convict you. God's word will

always guide, lift, and encourage you. Let God's word be your True North. So, meditate upon God's word, day and night. Recite God's word. Chew on God's word. Work on it and let it work on you.

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A digression: My experience of meatloaf is that it gets better with time. The first night, right out of the oven, it's okay. The second night when you heat it up, it's getting better. But by the third time you pull out the meatloaf from the fridge (on the third, or fourth, or fifth night), it's really getting good. The flavors have blended together and become deliciously melded to one sublime taste sensation.

This, I realize, could be a matter of taste.

But this is not: When we come to God's word again and again, our experience of it gets better and better. Our appreciation of it deepens. We work on it. It works on us. The longer we marinate in it, the longer we let it steep, the more it changes us. The longer we wrestle with, or sit with, or work with, or meditate on scripture, the more of it has rubbed off on and into us. Alleluia!

The Psalmist is telling us, *Keep reading, learning, and living the scriptures*. Get to know the stories of the saints who paced through Genesis, and Exodus, and Leviticus, and through all the other pages of scripture.

This Psalm is begging us, then, to pay attention. Pay attention to the scriptures and we'll learn faithfulness from Abraham. From Sarah we'll learn to expect the impossible from God. From Joseph's arrogance we'll learn humility. From Joseph's captivity we'll learn patience. From Moses we'll learn to speak up even when we don't have courage. God will give us courage and help.

From Ruth we'll learn what it means to be a friend. From Naomi we'll learn what it means to accept another person's help even when we didn't ask for it. From David we'll learn to trust God; we'll also learn to curb our appetites lest they destroy us. David will teach us also to grieve and to dance. From Micah, we'll learn to burn with the passion of ten-thousand stars seeking justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God.

God will speak through the written words. God's word will both humble us and stiffen within us resolve to love God, rightly to love self, and to love neighbor.

The First Psalm urges us to be rooted in God's word. Put the lessons of scripture in your tool kit. Then, the hope of the exiled will fire our own hope. The wisdom of Solomon will shed clarifying light on our life's problems. The justice of the prophets will shape our understanding of what God requires of us bravely to do.

As we let God's word be at the heart of our heart, we will be oriented towards holier, higher things. As we let God's word transform and shape us, we'll begin to care about loving and healing the whole, wide world.

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The wicked sinners in Psalm One may look a lot like you and me. It's not what they do or how they behave that is the problem. It's what they are focused on. *For the Psalmist, the wayward wicked are those people who focus on things and people other than God*. The righteous are the ones who turn to God and who admit that they live, move, and have their being in God

The Psalmist, in this First Psalm, is the mother who tells us to stay focused on God's word. Get up. Get dressed. It's Sunday. Get to church. *By the grace of God, be righteous by calling upon and living for the God we read about in scripture.*

To this God be honor and glory forever. AMEN.

Psalm 1:1-6

- 1 Happy are those
 who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
 or take the path that sinners tread,
 or sit in the seat of scoffers;
- 2 but their delight is in the law of the LORD,
 and on his law they meditate day and night.
- 3 They are like trees
 planted by streams of water,
 which yield their fruit in its season,
 and their leaves do not wither.
 In all that they do, they prosper.
- 4 The wicked are not so,
 but are like chaff that the wind drives away.
- 5 Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
 nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
- 6 for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
 but the way of the wicked will perish.

ⁱ That old chestnut is not original. I do not know the source.