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2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1
Mark 3:20-35
June 10, 2018

Abington Presbyterian Church

NOT LOSING HEART

Nancy and I went to her high school reunion this weekend. She enjoyed getting to see members of her class and others she had known from years ago. Many of us have experienced a sense of nostalgia and fondness when we have gone back to a place that once was home to us.

The Gospel of Mark tells us that after Jesus had been active in ministry in towns along the Sea of Galilee, he went back to where he had grown up, Nazareth. It was a strange homecoming, however. Before Jesus can even get to where his mother and siblings were living, he is inundated with crowds of needy people. They must have heard of his healing powers and his teaching prowess. In the nomenclature of the day, he is casting out demons, taking on the detrimental forces that dominate people's lives to liberate them so there is the prospect that they could have lives of wholeness and fullness. His mother and siblings hear he is in town and they go to check on him, but he is so engulfed by the crowds of people seeking healing that he can't find the time and space to pause to have a meal with them. They begin to worry about Jesus' well-being. They hear some folks describe their family member as having gone out of his mind; perhaps they are inclined to agree. They don't understand why he is doing what he is doing – hanging out in the midst of the neediest of people. Imagine a surgeon who works passionately on one wounded person after another when something catastrophic has happened – Jesus, in essence, would not come out of the operating room to spend time with his own family. His family members, at that point, actually seek to restrain Jesus, Mark tells us. I have to imagine they wanted to do this for his own good. “Let's bring him home, let him get some rest, and help him figure out how to use his amazing gifts in less demanding situations.” It is at this point that Jesus might have wanted to be wearing one of those tee shirts that says, “Friends welcome; relatives by appointment only.” His family does not understand his desire to be engulfed by people in need, so he could offer restoration and newness.

Perhaps it is the newness of Jesus' style that upsets the religious scribes who also show up on the scene. They knew this guy was doing things in a totally different way than they had sanctioned and they understood themselves to be a good influence on society. So, if he wasn't operating according to their rules, then he must be evil. They respond to him with all the politeness they would use if they were on Twitter. They decide to disparage him, to demonize him, saying Jesus may be casting out evil spirits, however he must be using evil powers to do so. Jesus responds telling them that it made no sense for someone Satanic to be casting out Satan. He went on to say that a house, even a house of evil that is divided against itself, will not be able to stand. Perhaps the figurative religious house that is divided against its own purpose from God won't be able to stand either.

Anyway, here is a situation, a homecoming, where Jesus not only is facing crushing crowds of people with all kinds of need, he is doing so while his very own family doesn't understand what he is all about, so they are trying to compel him to change course. He is facing the waves of need and the questions from his own family while also facing a heartless attack from respected religious leaders from the center of power of the religious structures at that time. The whole scene makes me wonder how Jesus managed to keep from losing heart when he was faced with such daunting challenges.

The Apostle Paul wrote about not losing heart in his own itinerant ministry of proclaiming the good news of God's loving activity in the world. He had gone through very difficult times as well, in various places having been imprisoned repeatedly by the Romans for his faith, having worked with a variety of faith groups that fought with one another, which were, at times, abusive toward him. He was getting older, and Paul and his partners in ministry knew their own physical limits that included the prospect of physical decline and their own mortality. Still, in writing to the church in Corinth, Paul says, we, in our ministry, do not lose heart.

Have you known those who rose to a challenge and would not give up? The spouse who became a care-giver for a life-partner through a long illness; the adoptive family who takes in a child with special needs; someone who sees a need and keeps addressing it, throwing their very heart into that kind of work? Have you known

someone who challenged norms, not for their own interests, but to serve God's interests?

Having heart, a heart to join in Christ's ministry, has to require a certain amount of compassion that is willing to encounter unpleasant conditions to try to address the needs of those who are in worse situations. It has to include a resilience that is based not on a sense of compulsion, but on a sense of call to live out what is understood to be God's purpose. It has to put aside any sense of selfishness or self-pride. It has to focus on God's acceptance rather than the acceptance of other people. How does one not lose heart when challenges arise? How do we keep from pulling back from what we are called to do, from being who we are called to be?

Anna Ricks is not a doctor or a nurse, but she asked for and got permission to use a stethoscope to listen to the heart beat of a man she had just met. Her son, Greg, a father of three, had been left brain dead after a car accident. After learning he couldn't be saved, his grief-stricken mother decided to allow his heart to be used for a transplant. She characterized her son as having a big, beautiful heart and she didn't want it to be finished beating. Another Greg, Greg Robbins, from Raleigh, North Carolina, had suffered a recent heart attack that had left him unable to be active in any way. His heart would not sustain his life much longer. The younger Greg's heart was a good match for him. After his surgery, Anna asked to meet the recipient. At their long-awaited meeting, Anna took a stethoscope and listened to her son's heart inside the transplant patient's chest. "I hear you, baby - I hear you," she emotionally recalled saying. "It reminds me of the first time, when I was carrying him, and I went to the doctor's and heard his heartbeat. My son's alive." Her grandchildren then got the opportunity to listen to their late father's heartbeat.¹

Both Jesus and Paul did not lose heart because they allowed the heart of God to beat within them. They had stayed on the road throughout their ministries – but wherever they might be, they were at home as they allowed the heartbeat of God to energize their ministry. Their home was not a geographical location or a particular house. Their home was wherever the heart of God that beat within them took them. And although I'm sure they had times of frustration and discouragement, they ultimately did not lose heart because they lived with God's loving heart beating

within them. There were those who had made family or societal order or love for country sacred, but they had listened to the beat of God's heart and now it beat within them. The house did not have to be divided against itself. Jesus and Paul had expanded familial ties, recognizing that someone did not have to be of the same blood in order to be family.

When we feel like we are not up to doing what we are called to do as followers of Jesus Christ, think about what it would sound like, what it would feel like to have the heart of God beating within you. When the challenges come, that's a way to keep from losing heart. That's a way as children of God, as sisters and brothers of Christ, to keep from losing ourselves.

¹ <https://www.insideedition.com/headlines/23900-mom-breaks-down-in-tears-as-she-hears-sons-heart-beating-in-man-who-received>