

Keeping your heart open by guarding your heart!

Loving God, help us to hear Your words of love this day so that we might live as people of generosity in our world. And assist us we pray – that the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts are pleasing to You – our Healer, our Liberator, our Redeemer. AMEN.

The longer we are immersed in the Christian faith – the more we will encounter contradictions, paradoxes, and enigmas that might leave us scratching our heads in dismay. Even when we use the term ‘mystery’ to describe something that is not completely understandable or outside our comprehension – it can be difficult to reconcile some things to our real-life experience.

Last week, we read the story of Jacob literally wrestling with what he thought was a manifestation of God – his physical struggle an illustration of what many of us experience as we work at incorporating faith into our lives.

And as I read the scripture passages for this week – I found myself thinking about one of the big struggles . . . one of the big paradoxes . . . that I believe each of us is called to live out in our lives.

You see, for any of us to be in any deep, meaningful relationship we need to be willing to open our hearts – have the very core of our beings exposed – to the one we want to be in relationship with . . . we need to allow ourselves to be vulnerable.

And if there is one thing that all of us have learned in our lives – being vulnerable is a risky proposition . . . opening ourselves up can lead to pain where the wounds we receive are hard to heal.

Yet this is exactly what God wants us to do. In fact, it is what must occur if we want to be in relationship . . . if we want to be truly connected . . . to the very source of life and love – to have the best chance to live our best lives.

Where the paradox comes into play is that while we are called to open our hearts – our souls – in order to fully experience God’s love, we are also told we must guard our hearts . . . we must keep the core of who we are . . . safe.

But how is it possible to be open and vulnerable while at the same time protecting ourselves from harm?

Jesus – who should be our role model for life – was open and vulnerable to God and people. And on the surface, it doesn’t seem to work out very well for him most of the time.

He was rejected by those who knew him as he grew up. He was pushed aside by those who thought he was irrelevant. He was silenced by those who thought he was a threat. And he was betrayed by those who were his closest friends.

Yet, somehow in all of life’s ups and downs – joys and sorrows; celebrations and tragedies; victories and defeats . . . Jesus never closed his heart while somehow still being able to guard his essence – the core of his being.

So, the question we must ask ourselves is this – what does it mean to guard our hearts?

Now, most people think that guarding one’s heart means protecting oneself from pain by being closed off. But what if . . . what if . . . that is not what God means – for that is certainly not how Jesus lived.

What if . . . guarding our hearts is more about ensuring that our hearts are free from the thorns and weeds – the behaviours, attitudes, beliefs – that might grow and choke out life if we allow them to be planted in us?

In today’s passage from Genesis, we heard about how easily some thorns and weeds can grow and literally choke out life.

Jacob had wrestled with God and as a result Jacob was blessed and literally transformed by his encounter. He was no longer Jacob but Israel – one who was blessed with many children.

But he did something that ended up sowing the seeds of bitterness and envy into the hearts of most of his sons – by doing something that many parents do.

As a parent – he chose a favourite child. And while his reasoning might not have been malicious – the result fostered an environment where sibling rivalry went to the extreme.

Joseph – even though he was the youngest – used his position as favourite as an opportunity to feel superior to his brothers. He acted as a spy – a snitch – telling his father just how bad . . . just how lazy his brothers acted.

And as a result, his brothers couldn't stand him – didn't want to be near him. Hear the description again:

Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him. (Genesis 37:3-4)

Into this reality – Joseph is sent out again to find his brothers and report back. And the brothers not wanting to be in relationship with him – moved to a different spot with the flocks. And when Joseph eventually found them – the rivalry had turned to such bitterness and hatred that we are told:

[The brothers] saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. (Genesis 37:18)

In the end one brother – Reuben – saved Joseph's life but he couldn't save him from being sold into slavery – being sold for twenty pieces of silver. Somehow, the seeds of envy and bitterness had grown into something monstrous – for how else could these words actually make any sense:

Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not

lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.” And his brothers agreed. (Genesis 37:26-27)

While it might be hard for us to imagine that kind of hatred – what we need to realize is that it all started due to favouritism and envy. Two things that are pretty common in our world.

Now, this might be an extreme case of sibling rivalry got wild. But I believe there is an important warning for us regarding what we need to guard against allowing to take root in our hearts – things we see in the actions of the parent and all the siblings – for no one is completely innocent in this story.

Favouritism is dangerous – not only for the one shown it but for the ones who feel slighted.

For favouritism seems to foster a sense of superiority in Joseph and this belief of superiority results in him believing he has the right to be their judge.

And favouritism fostered in the brothers a hatred and envy that left unchecked considered extreme violence as acceptable and selling their brother into slavery a compassionate compromise.

When we believe we are the favourite ones – the chosen ones – then we are in danger of having the thorn of superiority take root in our heart at the risk of treating others as projects to fix instead of people to love.

When we believe we have been mistreated or devalued – then we are in danger of having the thorns of bitterness and envy take root in our heart at the risk of believing that the destruction of those against us is not only acceptable but desirable and necessary.

Yet, Jesus tells us to love those against us – to work for the good of all creation – and remember that each of us is God’s favourite!

In today’s gospel we are reminded of another thorn that is often touted as acceptable in our world. The story is a continuation of the Jesus’ time on the other side of the lake that we looked at last week.

Last week, Jesus was trying to get away from people – he was tried; he was peopled-out. The crowds and his closest friends won't leave him alone. But instead of getting back in the boat – his compassion caused him to heal the sick and ensure everyone was well fed.

Now he is really done with people – at least for a little while – so he tells the disciples to use the boat. He dismisses the crowds. And he is finally alone – going to top of the mountain to pray.

When he is refreshed – when he is restored . . . he decides to meet up with his closest friends . . . be it in a very unusual way. We are told:

And early in the morning [Jesus] came walking toward them on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!" And they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid." (Matthew 14:25-27)

Now the disciples' reaction doesn't seem out of place – for I doubt any of us have ever seen someone walking on water either. But what is out of place for me is Peter's response.

I realize that typically Peter's response is seen as this great sign of faith but for me it is more of a symbol of pride got wild. You see, Peter feels that he is special – that he is really the first among equals. So great is his self-belief that he thinks he can do the same thing that Jesus is doing. For we read:

Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." [Jesus] said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. (Matthew 14:28-29)

Peter seems to be challenging Jesus – telling him proof it. Yet, when Jesus says sure – come on out and be with me – Peter's pride is no match for his fear . . . for we are told:

"... when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately

reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” (Matthew 14:30-31)

And perhaps that is why scripture tells us to have a humble heart – to cultivate in our hearts a true understanding of our limitations and the need to let God be God as we move through life.

Peter wasn’t wrong in moving out into the unknown – for stepping out onto the water. Where Peter got it wrong was in believing he could do it on his own.

And this is the danger for all of us. We have been conditioned by our culture, by our world – to believe that the goal in life is to become independent, self-reliant . . . to have pride in our work, to ensure everyone is aware of our achievements.

Yet what is common in both Joseph’s and Peter’s adventures – is what we must guard our hearts from with all our strength . . . the focus on self – the belief that “me” is all that matters. For, most of the thorns and weeds that invade our lives find their roots in selfishness.

This is why we can have open hearts while still guarding our hearts – for in reality we can only have truly open hearts if we are on guard against selfishness.

May we be people who open our hearts – putting others first and allowing God’s love to flow through us and through us – so that we might live our best lives by being connected fully to God.

AMEN.