



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker
November 11, 2018 Sermon

Today is Veteran's Day, which was first known as Armistice Day. It was one hundred years ago today, almost to the hour (the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month) that the Armistice ending World War I was proclaimed.

It was, in the words of David Lloyd George, prime minister of England, "the cruelest and most terrible war that ever scourged mankind." It showed us, in the words of Winston Churchill, the "fearful agencies of destruction" unique to modern warfare: machine guns, poison gas, heavy artillery, tanks, flamethrowers, land mines, submarine warfare, the aerial bombing of civilians.

And it showed us the consequences of that destruction: Nine million men killed in combat. Twenty-one million wounded; Countless millions of civilians died in one way or another because of the war. In the six hours between the time when the armistice was signed and when it was officially declared, almost 11,000 men were killed, wounded or went missing. 11,000. In six hours. After the war was already over.

It didn't start out that way, of course. In 1914, when the war began, for reasons that not even the principals could adequately articulate, Europe had been at peace for nearly one hundred years. The troops marched off to war in parade, to cheering, music, and much fanfare. It was, in the words of historian Barbara Tuchman, "the march of folly."

Please don't get me wrong: in saying all this I don't mean to slight veterans or Veterans Day in any way. Just the opposite. Like Deborah, "my heart goes out to the soldiers who offered themselves willingly for the people." But the best way to honor their sacrifice is by loving peace, and by setting our hearts on peace, especially now, since, in the past 100 years, the agencies of destruction have become so much more fearful and so much more destructive.

We become what we love. Or to put it another way, where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. And to love God, to set our hearts on God, is to know the heart of God. It is to know the heart of God who says this to his people:

How can I give you up, how can I hand you over?

My heart recoils within me;
my compassion grows warm and tender.
I will not execute my fierce anger;
I will not again destroy;
for I am God and no mortal,
the Holy One in your midst,
and I will not come in wrath.

God came down to us, not in wrath, but in Jesus Christ: the Holy One in our midst. God came down to us in Jesus Christ, to bind up our broken-hearts, to counsel and to comfort us, to assure us of his aid, to give us peace.

Order us in our loves, O God, order us in our loves.

Let us have a heart for God, and so have the heart of God; let us become a people of peace.

Order us in our loves, O God, order us in our loves.

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

A Heart in the Right Place

Scripture Lessons: Matthew 6:19-21, Psalm 84

I don't, of course, mean what the human being mistakes for his will—the conscious fume and fret of resolutions and clenched teeth—but the real center [of the person], what [God] calls the Heart.—C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*

Order me in my loves, O God, order me in my loves.—Augustine, *City of God*, XV.22

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God—Matthew 5:8

Preface to the First Scripture Lesson:

There are familiar, well-known sayings, expressions, turns of phrase, that when I hear them I think, "Sure, I know what that means—kind of, sort of." But then, if I try to say what it means . . . "Well, umm, uh you know. it pretty much means what it means . . . you know."

The Bible is full of such sayings . . . at least for me. Today's reading for example, from Matthew's Gospel, from the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus says: "Where your treasure there your heart will be also." "Well, sure, of course, I know what that means . . . it means that . . . well, your treasure . . . wherever that is . . . well, your heart's going to be in the same place, you know."

I'll try to do a little better than that in the sermon. But for now listen for God's word . . .

Sermon:

I want to talk about an old, old way of understanding what it means to be human, and to do that I need to tell you an old, old story.

It's about Odysseus, the hero of Homer's *Odyssey*, the ancient epic poem that tells the story of Odysseus's ten-year journey home from the Trojan War.

Odysseus is a different kind of hero. Ajax has great physical strength; Achilles is a great warrior; Agamemnon, a great king and general. Odysseus, while hardly a slouch in those areas, is, first of all, smart: resourceful, quick on his feet. His gifts are speech and intelligence. He's the favorite of Athena, the goddess of wisdom, and he is ingenious, clever, sometimes almost devious—he's called "wily, much-turning Odysseus." It's Odysseus who comes up with the idea of the Trojan Horse, the ruse by which the Greeks finally win the war.

So the story: Finally—after ten years of war and ten more years of wandering after the war, finally, Odysseus has made his way back home to Ithaca, where he is—or rather, was—king. But it's hardly the homecoming he dreamed of. First of all, he's alone—all his men and all his ships having been lost on the journey. Even worse, he arrives home only to find his palace overrun with suitors—these

princes, these local lords, these guys—108 of them in all—each of whom is vying to marry Penelope, Odysseus' wife and presumed widow (remember, he's been gone 20 years). They want to marry his wife so they can take over his kingdom. Penelope's been putting them off with a ruse of her own, but even she can't keep weaving that cloth forever. And to add injury to insult, these guys have all set up camp in Odysseus's palace—they're living high at his expense.

Odysseus is beside himself with rage. But remember there are 108 of them and only one of him.

But Athena helps him hatch a plan. He will come into the palace disguised as a beggar, and then, he will secretly reveal himself, first to his son Telemachus, and then to a few other trusted men. And then, when the opportune moment presents itself . . . it turns out to be when the suitors are all gathered in the great hall for an archery contest, then that "beggar" will string that great bow that no one else can string, and he'll throw off those beggar's rags, and then they'll recognize the great Odysseus, and then Telemachus—Telemachus will throw shields and swords to the trusted few, and then . . . well then, look out.

That's the plan. But on his first night back in the palace, as the "beggar" Odysseus falls asleep in a remote corner of the hall, he's awakened by the sounds of revelry: Penelope's maids—Penelope's maids—have come out to party with the suitors, as apparently they do every night when the lights go down. This is the last straw. His heart burns with anger within him. Forget the plan: Enough is enough, and he's had more than enough. He's ready to fight now! But then Odysseus gets a hold of himself, and we're told this:

Odysseus smote his breast saying, "Endure my heart, endure, you have endured worse than this."

And so (we're told) his heart was obediently steeled to patience, but Odysseus himself lies there, tossing and turning, until Athena finally comes down again to counsel and comfort him, to assure him of her aid, and at last, "she gave him sleep upon his eyelids."

It's the heart, the heart that makes us human, but even more than that, it's the direction of the heart—the right direction and obedience of the heart—that makes us truly human.

You know what I mean by "the heart." It's just that it's one of those familiar, well-known sayings, expressions, turns of phrase, that when you hear it, you think, "Sure, I know what that means—kind of, sort of . . . umm, uh you know, it pretty much means, well, you know, the heart.

So think of it this way: the heart is where music moves us. Oh, other things move us, too, in other ways and places: hunger, thirst, and other physical appetites move us; and the desire to know, to understand, to see the order of things, how things do—and could—work, that moves us, too. But music, while it certainly moves us physically (we dance), and while it certainly has an intellectual appeal (it's closely allied with mathematics), music first of all speaks to and from the heart: it gladdens and grieves, cheers and saddens, rouses and melts—our hearts. When, after the defeat of the Canaanites, Deborah, the great military leader of Israel, lifts her voice in song, she sings this: "My heart goes out to the soldiers, who offered themselves willingly, for the people."

You know what I mean by "the heart." But if you must get all dictionary-ish about it, try this: "the heart is the metaphorical center of feeling, the seat of human emotions." And that's true enough: the heart is where we feel emotions and where our passions originate. Or not: someone is cold- or hard-hearted, has a heart made of stone, or is, in the extreme, heartless.

But really, that doesn't get to the heart of the matter (sorry). The heart is the center not only of our feelings, but also of our very selves. Of course, other things make us human, too: our bodies, our bodily needs and appetites, our wills, our minds and our reason. But it is the heart that lies at the

center, that brings them into focus, that activates and unites them: the intellectual, the visceral, and the volitional. I can have an idea of something; I can want it; I can even decide on it; but it's only when I set my heart on it, only when my heart is in it—it's only then that I really begin to make things happen.

Try it another way: the heart is what you might call the spirited part of us; and not just individually but also collectively: as in school spirit, or for the military, as in esprit de corps. And so the association of both school spirit and esprit de corps with music: as long as there is Ohio State football, and there will be the Best Damn Band in the Land; as long as there is an United States Air Force, there will be the Air Force Band and Bands, including the Band of Flight. And yes, I must say it for my UM friends, as long as there are Wolverines to our north, there will be a band playing Hail to the Victors—just not on November 24th.

It's our spiritedness—it's our heart—that makes us who we are. If something touches my heart, it touches me; if I take something to heart, it becomes part of who I am; when I treasure it in my heart, it becomes dear to me, when I speak it from the heart, it is what I truly believe; when you know my heart, you know me; when I give you my heart, I give you myself. Our heart is who we are, or better, what we become. Which means that what we become is determined by the direction of our hearts, and the direction of our hearts is determined by what we love.

Order me in my loves, O God, order me in my loves—that's the well-known prayer of St. Augustine, a prayer that acknowledges, in the words of the old hymn, that "our hearts are prone to wander." In other words, we don't always love what we ought or as we ought. In his prayer, Augustine asks that he would love first things—you shall love the Lord God with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself—first, and second things (that would be everything else) second.

And that's the greatness of Odysseus in the story: he's a warrior, someone for whom honor is of great importance. Everything he sees when he gets home is an insult to his honor. His heart burns with anger. Odysseus loves his honor, but that's not his first love. That would be wisdom and the goddess of wisdom who loves him. "Endure my heart, endure . . ." And so his heart was obediently steeled to patience." It's the direction of the heart—the right direction and obedience of the heart—that makes us who we are.

The danger is that we love second things—the things that are not God and neighbor, things like money, power, prestige, security, honor, self-image, pleasure, amusement—the danger is that we love these second things first, love them as if they were of ultimate importance, love them as if they were God. To love something that is not God as if it were God—that is the definition of idolatry. In the ancient world, idolatry also entailed worshipping a wood or stone statue of a god or goddess in some kind of temple or shrine, which we don't do anymore. But that doesn't mean we can't be idolatrous. And in our idolatry, whatever its object, we become cold-hearted, hard-hearted, towards everything else, including our neighbor, including those we're supposed to love. "The people have become as deaf and as dumb as the idols they worship," laments the Psalmist. And as heartless. We become what we love. The question is whether what we love is worthy of our love, our hearts, our selves.

Because make no mistake about it: we will love: one way or another, one thing or another, we will love. As one theologian put it, we human beings must have some kind of ultimate concern: something we live our lives for, something we organize our efforts and energies around. The only alternative is apathy, despondency, and despair—in other words, the surrender of our humanity. "The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity." So wrote the poet W.B. Yeats in describing the spiritual state of Europe at the end of the First World War, the Great War, the war to end all wars, which it didn't.