

# *Writings on the Heart*

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Emmanuel Friedens Church, Schenectady New York

March 22, 2015, the Fifth Sunday in Lent

Readings: Jeremiah 31:31-34

John 12:20-33

## I.

I am very glad to be with you this morning. Some days we may be in danger of taking it for granted, this privilege of being together in community in this congregation. But not this preacher, or as one of you likes to call me, not this parson! Not today. In the swift short ten months we have had together I have come to deeply appreciate this community of faith.

This morning my reason is this: I have met so many of you who know and live God's love, writings on the heart. This Love shows up, in little ways, over and over again in the love you show toward others.

There are many faith communities out there, many of them wonderful. But I have never served one with quite the wide variety of viewpoints and family histories that make up this congregation. We read aloud a written welcome of all people, on the fourth Sunday of every month, as we did this morning. I am so glad to be a newcomer in a community where it is so clear that these are not words or principles alone, not just policy or law, but rather words of grace: Love written on the hearts of the members of this church. If you are visiting for the first time, take my word for it. These words come from the center of our soul as a church.

Our selection from the book of the prophet Jeremiah today holds out the hope that some day the whole nation, even the whole world, will know God, and know love, with such intimacy. *But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says GOD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know GOD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says GOD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.*

Old Jeremiah might have intended those words for on little nation of God's chosen people. But we have come to believe in the intervening years that there is room in the promise for all of God's children.

## II.

Mary Konstantinous was a friend back in Waterbury, Connecticut in the 1980's. She was one of the most compassionate people in the world! We met first when I was helping out in a soup kitchen where she was a guest, as were her children. I thought the kids were cute, and my first impression was that Mary was quiet. But we got better acquainted later, because we both came to work at the same homeless shelter at night on the weekends. I was a graduate student taking time off from school. She was the single mother of nine children who ranged in age from twenty or so to four. She drove an old Ford Pinto that she ALWAYS parked facing downhill, and that I ALWAYS had to push in the morning to get her started for home, sometimes with the help of two or three of the guests. She couldn't afford child-care so the teenagers watched the little ones, at night when she was working. She hated doing that, being away from them at night, but there wasn't really much choice. Fortunately, they had the help of the world's most perfectly trained Doberman, who spoiled the kids and would have killed any intruders. It wasn't quite like that fluffy dog in *Peter Pan*.

Mary and I talked a lot when the guests were sleeping, or over breakfast before she went home to get the children mobilized for school. It was the first time in my short life I had had a good friend who had to struggle just to feed her family. She was a sharp thinker, and a committed person of faith. Mary's compassion for the guests at the shelter was deep—in part because she was just plain good people. And in part it was because she was well aware of what being homeless was about, and what trying to hold on to your children, and care for them like you know in your bones you need to, was all about. And Mary Konstantinous knew what was right and what was wrong, what was love and what was falsehood, with her heart.

Mary managed to help one young Yale graduate student see that people can't be reduced to stereotypes. Let's just say she helped me to see something about humanity that for me had been invisible before. I never again would be able to deal with poverty, or with the struggles of families, just as statistics, like some uncaring unseeing judge.

I'll share just one occasion that helped God write on my heart. When she heard one evening I was going to an anti-nuclear protest the next weekend, at a submarine factory, Mary took it in her heart to come too. She showed up there in Groton,

Connecticut with that awful little green car, jam-packed with several, I believe seven, of her kids, the tail lights almost at street level. I was stunned she made it, between that car and all the kids. I put the littlest one on my shoulders. Out we marched. Mary had come to declare peace, and they were going to do this as a family. As we walked past the lines of police in the streets, the children followed after, and it must have looked like ducklings following their mom. The television cameras, normally looking for some kind of civil disobedience or drama, had no use for anyone else — Mary Konstantinous and her kids made the news that night. One poor woman with Jesus in her heart told those reporters — told them with anger and with love in her voice and face-- that she didn't see any use in spending all these millions on weapons of mass destruction. They needed to spend a little of that money on her children, and on homeless people. She spoke what she knew in her heart.

### III.

Some of our friends may wonder: why do they bother with this church thing, this religion thing? What difference does it make? Let me share with you a little what's on MY heart. Ever since I met my friend Mary, I have wanted to be part of building up and strengthening faith communities where Mary and her children, along with college professors and business executives and nurse's aides, social workers and single dads looking for work, people with hidden gifts and hidden disabilities from every part of the community can come together and share this love. Human places where all of us can be encouraged and affirmed and inspired to share it as much. I've wanted to see folks moved by their hearts and by each other's hearts--their faith community-- to share the Love out beyond the walls of the building, in their own neighborhoods and families, workplaces and yes, like Mary and her little ones, even in the shelters and the streets and an occasional ever-loving protest.

When I came here to you in Schenectady, I knew that was the kind of church this congregation is striving to be: a place where it doesn't matter what your orientation or the size of your paycheck is. I knew this was a church with families with two dads or two moms, or one of either, or one of both: a church where some folk brought their grandchildren, and little children have also been known to haul in initially reluctant parents. I knew this to be a community where we long to love and support each other, whether we have been in the church for a week or for several decades. And ten months in, I know it now from experience of my own with you.

So tell your friends, this is what it means — this why we bother with church, this is what our religion means. We may not do it perfectly; each of us has our issues, our

struggles, our left-over prejudice and traces of the old hardness of heart. But we get together here every week because there is this Love, written on our hearts. And we are trying to pay attention, trying to trace the sacred engraving with our lives, trying to love people the way we have experienced that love from God, often through other people. That's why we serve meals to our neighbors and each other. That's why we have rummage sales where you can buy an overcoat for a quarter, and that's why some of us keep coming back for more, even after eighty or ninety years.

#### IV.

We gather here today in memory of one man who gave his whole life, so that Greeks as well as Jews, women and men, poor and rich alike could look up and have some hope. He spent his life teaching them the lessons of a new kind of covenant, love written on the heart. And in the end he was willing to lay down that life, so that lesson might take root in the rocky soil that is our humanity. He did not come just to write on our individual souls, but also to create communities of hope and wonder, justice and love. Today we honor that love by going to do likewise. But we cannot do it alone. We need each other—and we need a bit of help from those who are not here yet.

It is my prayer that the spirit which dominates our life will be so full of that Love, so manifestly give witness to that etching on our hearts, that others may show up, and say – “what is this thing these people have? Give me some of that!”

There are some who have visions, and some who dream dreams. There are some who can analyze their way to God, and some who can hear voices in the night. And many of us do not have these gifts but rather other ones. However it is we listen to the Holy One, we also look inward, and we find, written there, written on our own hearts, words of promise and words of covenant, words that say “I love you with *my* whole heart, and I am willing to forgive and forget what has sometimes been between us. Now love me, love me and love your neighbors, love the ground you walk on, the sky you share with all creatures. Love the earth, love even your enemies....” These are but the beginning of what is written on our hearts. Trace the words with your imagination. Trace them with your mind. Trace them with your fingers, and trace them with your lives. These are the holy writings on the heart. May they some day capture the hearts of all humanity.