

Meditation: “Beyond Body Art”

When Barbara and I first moved to Strathroy over twenty years ago, there an empty lot beside us. Then the son of a farmer from Thorndale built a house and moved in with his partner and a couple of children. Sally, I’ll call her, was a unique individual. She kept and bred pet snakes, geckos, and bearded dragons, and she had several tattoos. You may be familiar with Tupperware parties, well Sally held tattoo parties. Friends of hers would come over, along with a tattoo artist, and they would all get new tattoos. I always wondered if they were those transforming tattoos, you know, the ones that start off as a rowboat on your abdomen and, forty years later, end up as the Queen Mary. Sally was a person who carried a lot of pain deep inside. In years previous she had engaged in self-cutting. The scars were up and down her arms. It was a way of masking the emotional pain inside. I often wondered if the tattoos, and the pain involved in getting one, had replaced the self-cutting – a way of having control of something in her life. I often wondered, and still do, what it was that caused such emotional pain that she felt the need to cut or tattoo herself.

I guess I was thinking of all this because in today’s lesson we hear God say “I will write my law on their hearts.” But the metaphor of a tattoo when thinking of God writing on our hearts only goes so far. Firstly, thanks to lasers, tattoos are no longer permanent. Secondly, and more importantly, in Leviticus (chapter 19, verse 28 if you want to look it up) says “You shall not tattoo any marks upon you; I am the Lord.” It seems tattoos are a defilement of our bodies, a defilement of God’s creation, a defilement of God’s temple. The other major problem with the metaphor is that tattoos are only skin deep; they are on the surface.

When I volunteered at the homeless drop in program in Toronto I met Ralph. Ralph used to be a successful businessman; had his own television repair shop. Something happened in Ralph’s life, something that Ralph would never talk about, and Ralph walked away from his business, and from his home, and from his former life. Ralph started to live on the streets. Ralph had his quirks, but he wasn’t seriously mentally ill. Ralph may have imbibed on occasion, but he wasn’t an addict. Ralph was soft spoken and well mannered and refused, even on the coldest days of winter or the hottest days of summer, to live in a

shelter. Shelters were places where you got beaten up, had your shoes stolen, and/or picked up lice or bed bugs or TB. Shelters were places to be avoided. Ralph lived, year round on the streets for forty years. One lovely spring morning Ralph was outside having a smoke and he started coughing. I mean really coughing, and then blood started coming up. We got him seated and immediately sent for two of the volunteers downstairs who were retired doctors. An ambulance was called and Ralph went to the hospital.

During his time in hospital some street outreach workers met with Ralph and with Ralph's blessing arranged a place for Ralph to go when he was released.

Within six months of his release from hospital, Ralph was dead. Now you may think that tragic, but Ralph died happy. We visited him shortly before his death, at the rooming house he lived in. Ralph had, for the first time in forty years, a roof over his head, a safe place to sleep, a kitchenette, cupboards with food in them, a bank account with money in it. For the first time in forty years Ralph had company and was able to play the host by serving us a cup of tea. For the first time in forty years Ralph had a place where he belonged, and having a place where you belong means that somehow, in the grand scheme of things, you matter as a human being.

For years Ralph knew, intellectually, that he should not be living outdoors. He knew that he should find a place to live in. But that knowledge was only in his head, and not in his heart. It was surface knowledge, not deep down in the core of his being. In that sense, it was like a tattoo, on the surface only, not having penetrated to the depths of his body. When Ralph was in hospital, that knowledge that was in his head, moved into his heart. What he had known intellectually, he then knew in the depths of his being. What had been inconsequential, had become important, even of vital importance to him. And this is what God means when saying that "I will write my law on their hearts."

If we know God's law in our heads only, it is like knowing a piece of trivia, interesting, but of little consequence. But when we know something in our hearts, it is all that matters, for what is in your heart is what you truly treasure. Having God's law written on our hearts goes well beyond tattoos that are only skin deep. Written on our hearts, it goes way beyond body art.

This Lent the readings have been about covenants. God's covenant with Noah – the sign of which is the bow in the sky after a rainfall; God's covenant with Abraham – to be the father of nations as indicated by the changing of his name from Abram (exalted father) to Abraham (father of multitudes); and our side of the covenant with God – the ten commandments. Covenants are about relationships, and relationships are about commitment, and commitment is about deep, abiding love. One more thing about covenants is that covenants create identity.

When something is carved on stone tablets, it can be stored away in a chest. When something is written on paper, it can be put on the bookshelf to collect dust. When something is written on our hearts, it becomes part of who we are – it is of vital importance to us – it forms our identity and changes us forever.

When God's dreams and desires are written on our hearts, God's dreams and desires become our dreams and desires. That is what God is talking about here. It's that our relationship becomes more than just a Sunday morning thing, like the 'Sunday clothes' we take out of the closet and dust off to wear to church - it becomes who we are and what our life's purpose is. The thing that is in our heart is the thing that we spend our lives pursuing.

Remember the tv commercial for the Capital One credit card, 'what's in your wallet?' As we enter the final two weeks of this season of introspection, take time to ask and explore, what's in your heart?