

GOD IS GREATER THAN OUR HEARTS

I John 3:16-24

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Fifth Sunday of Easter, April 4, 2021, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. This sermon was preached to a handful of people under COVID-19 restrictions and livestreamed.

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

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Today’s service marks the first time during COVID that we have had one of our recognitions in worship, and I can think of no more appropriate recognition than that of presenting Bibles to our third graders. The Bible is a book – or rather a library of 66 books – that the church holds up in a special way as telling the story of the faith of people who have gone before us, the story of God’s interaction with them, and therefore as inviting us to explore or own faith and God’s interaction with us. The message found in this library called the Bible is aptly captured by the song we learned as children and can still tear up over as adults: “Jesus loves me; this I know; for the *Bible* tells me so.”¹ He does; it does; that is why we present the Bible to every third grader at Westminster.

I.

I want to share with all of you – in person, livestream, and especially those in the third grade (whatever that has meant this last year!) – that one of my favorite verses is this library called the Bible is buried in the middle of one of the books near the end, in a shelf up against a wall in the far corner of the library. The name of the book is “The First Letter of John,” and we call it “First John” for short.

Like a lot of passages this one doesn’t necessarily grab us when we first read it.

- It isn’t like Moses encountering the Burning Bush² or us hearing the 23rd Psalm – “The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want.”³

¹ Words by Anna Bartlett Warner (1859), available at https://hymnary.org/text/jesus_loves_me_this_i_know_for_the_bible.

² Exodus 3:1-12.

³ Psalm 23:1.

- It lacks the drama of Isaiah's call in the Temple: "Here am I; send me!"⁴; the power of Paul's Damascus Road Experience⁵; the pain of Christ's cry from the cross: "My God! My God! Why hast Thou forsaken me?"⁶
- It doesn't have Noah in the Ark⁷ or Jonah in the belly of the whale.⁸

But one statement – from one verse within this passage – jumped out at me thirty years ago and has stuck with me ever since. The verse is this: "*God is greater than our hearts.*"

II.

When I hear the word "heart," I think of our *feelings* and *emotions*. In our common language, *the heart* is the place where we *feel* something. Not literally or physiologically, but when we feel something, we feel it in our heart. Our hearts laugh and cry; they are bowed down and lifted up. As we sung in Sunday School when I was a child: "I've got joy, joy, joy, joy, down in my heart, down in my heart, down in my heart."⁹ The heart is the seat of our emotions.

I grew up in a part of the country where most people who believed in God were emotional about it. But I was not a very emotional person when I was young, and I didn't always *feel* the presence of God.

When I first heard this verse – "God is greater than our hearts" – I felt *reassured*. This verse promised me that God still existed, that God still was present in the world and to me, that God still cared for me, even when I wasn't *aware* of it. Even when I couldn't *feel* God in my heart, I was *promised* that "God is greater than our hearts." Or as the prayer I shared on Easter Sunday says:

*Lord, I thank you
For a life that doesn't depend
On how I feel at any one moment.*

Thus, over the last thirty or forty years, I have come to accept that whether we are

- Happy or sad,
- Lonely or growing ever closer to the person we love the most,
- Hopeful about the future or resigning ourselves to a sense that things will never change,

God is *with* us, for God is *greater* than our hearts.

God is with us:

- Even when we are not *aware* of God
- Even when we cannot *see* God
- Even when we cannot *feel* God's presence

⁴ Isaiah 6:1-8.

⁵ Acts 9:1-19.

⁶ Mark 15:34.

⁷ Genesis 6-9.

⁸ Jonah 1-3.

⁹ Word by George W. Cooke, available at <https://www.lyrics.com/lyric/1488236/Down+in+My+Heart>.

- Even when we cannot bring ourselves to *pray* to God
- Even when we cannot bring ourselves to *believe* in God
- Even when we are *angry* at God for something that has happened
- Even when we *cannot figure out* why something so bad would happen to somebody we love who is so good, so innocent, so undeserving of what they are going through.

God is *with* us, because God is *greater* than our hearts.

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Flannery O'Connor was a devout Roman Catholic young woman raised in Milledgeville, Georgia. When she went to study creative writing at the University of Iowa in 1946, she was only 21 years of age; and she was wrestling with her strict Catholic faith. She wrote in her journal:

Dear God, I cannot love Thee the way I want to. You are the slim crescent of a moon that I see and my self is the earth's shadow that keeps me from seeing all the moon...I do not know you God because I am in the way. Please help me to push myself aside.¹⁰

Even when we feel *we* are in the way, God is *present*, because God is *greater* than our hearts.

III.

A couple of years ago, Maggie and I had good friends who were expecting to become grandparents, but early on and throughout the pregnancy, they were told that there might be significant problems with the grandchild to be born. We were both fearful of what might happen, and felt for our friends and the parents of the child.

But when the child was born, almost miraculously, everything was okay. The baby seemed healthy. The mother seemed healthy. All the fears and warnings of the doctor dissipated into thin air. We each happened to be home when we learned of the birth, via emails we opened on our separate computers at the same time, and we were drawn into the room of the others to share the good news, met halfway in between, and were both moved to tears. It just didn't seem possible, but God had turned out to be *greater* than the *fear* and *heaviness* our individual hearts had felt.

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As I followed updates the trial of Derek Chauvin the last few weeks, I had a growing sense that there might be a rare conviction in this case, though I was braced for the more common outcome of acquittal. I was in a Zoom meeting with another church when he verdict, and I learned of it when Maggie came down and whispered in my ear that the verdict was in and it was a conviction. I had to mute myself and take my face off the screen for a few seconds because my eyes welled up with tears. I was more emotional than I thought I would be, if for no other reason than I think, as a country, this verdict might give us – to use a phrase that often arises for ill during these recent killings – “room to breathe.”

To take advantage of this room, this verse has some wisdom to offer.

¹⁰ From *The New Yorker* 9/16/2013, available at <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/09/16/my-dear-god>.

If we are going to address the relationships between police and the communities they are commissioned to serve and protect:

Black and Brown communities

Asian communities

White communities in which killings also occur

- We must recognize the *intensity of emotion* that people within these communities feel when a police officer takes the life of a member of the community, a friend or neighbor or family member.
- We must recognize the sense of trauma that lives within Black Americans because of the history they have inherited that never quite goes away even when life and conditions are relatively positive.
- We must recognize the sense of umbrage and offense that white Americans often feel when labelled as racist for inheriting a nation that has not yet overcome its history of racism while not feeling they are personally deserving of this label.

I think there is no greater emotional issue in our country than race. Yet it will take more than *emotions* – angry or inspired – to address and resolve it.

- To be sure it *will* take listening to one another's *hearts* and the emotions reside within them.
- But then it will take our *minds* to *understand* what we are hearing and to come up with *specific* ways to make change.
- And it will take our *wills* – personally and politically – to enact change.

What this long-favorite verse says to me in this historic situation in which we live is this: If our awareness of race and racism in this country begins in our *hearts*, it has to move to our minds and wills. But the verse says: "God is greater than our hearts."

This verse from this book stuck in the far corner of the library tells me that if we will listen to our hearts, And to the hearts of people whose experience is so different than ours, we will be equipped to move to the mind and the will. And between heart and mind and will, we will come so much closer to a solution, to a resolution, than we are today.

Yet because God is greater than our hearts, God is greater also than our minds and our wills. But when we use all three, individually and as a people, we will draw closer and closer and closer to the world God created and has redeemed in the life, death, and resurrection of his son, in whose name and by whose inspiration we go about this business.

Amen.

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