

**LISTENING IN LENT: TO OUR HEARTS; MATTHEW 6:1-6, 16-21; ASH  
WEDNESDAY, MARCH 6, 2019; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER  
CHURCH**

I have been reading about the Romantic poets in preparation for our Lilly sabbatical coming up this summer. One of those poets, John Keats, was a fascinating, tragic figure, at least from one vantage point – he contracted tuberculosis at age 23 and died at age 25 at the peak of his genius and productivity.

Keats was, many agree, the greatest writer of odes since Shakespeare and his poetry conveyed, as intensely as Shakespeare's, the full range of human emotions, passions and feelings – surpassing even his brilliant contemporaries.

He was the youngest of the Keats siblings – who lost their parents early in life and were raised by an elderly family member supplied by a trust administered by a begrudging, miserly trustee. Keats was small of stature, handsome, playful, feisty, mischievous and deeply loyal to his brothers and friends.

But the other reason he is a tragic figure is because when he contracted TB he was engaged to the love of his life – Fanny Brawne. They had known each other for two years and fell deeply in love. Yet, upon news of his diagnosis and the recommendation of his doctor to move to a warmer climate, John postponed the wedding and moved to Rome where he lived with his friend Percy Bysshe Shelley.

Keats died four months later never to return to England to marry Fanny as was their plan; his dear friend Shelley moved to Lerici, Italy on the Tuscany coast where *he* died a year after at age 29. Carol and I are extraordinarily fortunate to be able to visit Keats' house in Rome and Shelley's home in Lerici and their gravesites in the Protestant cemetery in Rome.

So here's the point and a question: Scholars say Fanny was Keats' muse; she was his inspiration for the remarkable courage he demonstrated, his willingness to look death square in the eye without wavering or retreating into bitterness or sentimentality but to learn from his terminal illness, and how he was handling it, what he could about himself and about human existence; his aim was always to "make his soul better" as he put it.

It would be easy to make of this story a Greek drama; but in many ways it is just a story about two young people in love; what is notable, and what history has seen fit to preserve is the heart-shaping, soul-making devotion they had for each other.

The rewards of that devotion and love were, for John, his courage, his inspiration, his aim to be better than himself – which reminds me of that wonderful line by Jack Nicholson to Helen Hunt in "As Good As It Gets," "You make me want to be a better man." That's what Fanny did for John.

So here's my question: where is your heart? I don't mean behind your solar plexis or abandoned in San Francisco like the old song says, I mean – where is your heart relative to whomever or whatever it is that makes you want to be a better person?

And among what I would guess if you were to name them are spouses, partners, children and other loved ones who make us want to be a better people, if not also our devotion to this community and nation and the ideals that sustain it, where are our hearts relative to Jesus and the God who gave him to us?

That is what Matthew is getting at in today's reading. *Why is it and how is we practice what we believe?* St. Paul writes in the epistle for Ash Wednesday that he and his fellow evangelists "commended ourselves through affliction, hardship, calamity, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, and hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, and truthful speech" and though having nothing we possessed, he writes, everything.

Why would anyone enter such peril and endure such treatment and where would they find the depth of character to meet such circumstances with magnanimity? Not only did Paul know the love of God in the person of Jesus but he wanted others to experience that same life-changing joy and abundance and he and his little band of missionaries were willing to face any obstacle to share it. That joy, that purpose, that trust is what he meant by possessing everything.

In an age that celebrates the individual and witnesses *the receding* of individuals from authentic relationships into virtual worlds – silos – that require little if any empathy or sacrifice – Paul offers a radical manifesto not just for our souls but for our relationships and responsibility to one another.

And Matthew offers a vivid picture today of what such a life might look like. The contrast is made striking by hyperbole: the puffed up hypocrite is juxtaposed with the humble, quiet believer. In three parallel examples – almsgiving, prayer and fasting – these two act very differently. The hypocrite is in it to get attention, to win admiration for his piety, to be seen for the sake of being seen; the humble believer is in it to draw closer to God, to learn more of God's purpose and will for his life *without* drawing attention.

If I had to guess, I'd say that Jesus' listeners not to mention you and I all these centuries later actually have a little bit of both of these characters in us. Hence the warning Jesus offers today.

Here's what one commentator writes: No one sets out to be a hypocrite. It is not a planned activity. People are drawn into situations or habits whereby their practice of religion is meant to have an impact on others – on children, on fellow church members, on the broader community – until the need for human approval subtly becomes the idol to which worship is offered.

The practice often becomes so conventional that the guilty would be surprised by the charge of hypocrisy. Part of the difficulty is this blindness to what is taking place *and the fact* that the religious establishment tends to thrive on the social pressures that nurture such piety.

The passage does not outlaw public prayer or giving of alms in worship or fasting; but it warns us not to use religious practices for ulterior motives, or to seek social approval.

So if we don't use religious practices to win social approval what do we use them for? To draw closer to God, to express awe and wonder at those moments we often take for granted that were, in fact, the answer to our prayers – for physical healing, or reconciliation in a relationship or for enough energy or resources to get through the next meeting or to the end of the month.

We pray and fast and give alms to keep our allegiance to God healthy and strong. And we do these things – as Matthew advises today – in quiet, behind closed doors so not to allow recognition by any except the God who is our heart's muse and inspiration.

But the question I asked at the beginning is appropriate to ask again at the end of this meditation and at the start of this season of Lent. Is God our heart's muse and inspiration? Does our relationship to Jesus make us want to be better people? A better congregation? Are we even able or comfortable to refer to Jesus in such personal terms? Or is Jesus and the God who sent him more distant, removed from our everyday reality, only surfacing when we face some personal dilemma or crisis?

Did you notice that urgent plea at the beginning of Paul's letter we read from today? "We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God....we urge you not to accept the grace of God in vain."

If you're not feeling particularly reconciled to God you've come to the right place. There's so much distraction in our daily lives – according to one study the average smart phone user opens his phone more than 80 times a day.

Lent is a time to let go of all the distraction, to clear the decks so we don't stumble over the extraneous clutter of our lives; so that we can establish some calm, some context to go deeper; so that we can heed Paul and use the next 40 days to be reconciled to God.

Matthew says "your Father who sees in secret will reward you in secret." I suspect the reward Fanny Brawne had for her devotion to John Keats was not notoriety for being associated with the great poet –

I suspect that Fanny's reward were cherished memories of the hours she and John spent together walking down the lane of her neighborhood, sitting under the plum tree where he wrote "Ode to a Nightingale", holding hands, talking about their future together.

Our reward, as we enter Lent and practice some quiet regimen of prayer and service will be to satisfy our longing to be spiritually whole; or you could say to fulfill the image of God in which we are made, in other words, to be better people not to impress anyone but to discover the fullness of God's dream and purpose for our lives which is, as Matthew says, our greatest treasure.

"I entreat you," Paul says "be reconciled to God." Let me offer some stronger synonyms from Mr. Roget's thesaurus for such a worthy admonition:

"I appeal, I beg, I exhort, I implore, I pester, I pray, I supplicate,  
*I urge you – be reconciled to God!" Amen.*