

## “The Steadfast Love of the Lord Never Ceases”

Wisdom 1:13-15, 2:23-24 • Lamentations 3:22-33 • Psalm 30 • 2 Corinthians 8:7-15 • Mark 5:21-43

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A number of you have been asking me recently how I'm doing. Between Sheren's untimely demise, and my recent ankle surgery, it has been a little rough lately. I appreciate all the prayers and support you've been giving me. Friday morning, before Sheren's memorial service, one of you asked me how I'm doing, and I started talking about my ankle, and this person said, “No ... how's your *heart*?”

We human beings are made of four basic ingredients. Jesus identified them, when he reminded us to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” (Mark 12:30) We've got a *heart* – the seat of our emotions. We've got a *soul* – that which connects us to the divine. We've got a *mind* – our intellect, our ability to *think*. And we've got *strength* – a physical body that houses all of the above. It's a good habit to ask ourselves how we're doing in each of those four categories. As for me – well, my *mind* is fine. My *body* – the stitches were removed on Thursday, and the medical staff said it's looking great. It just needs time to heal. Yesterday I was able to take my first few slow steps. I have to stay in the boot night and day for four more weeks, and then I can start weaning out of it. I can start taking showers again, although for the time being I've been enjoying a relaxing bubble bath every morning with my right leg draped over the edge of the tub, and then washing that leg separately. I thank God for whoever invented bubble bath!

Then there's my heart. How am I doing, *emotionally*? This is an important question. In our society, men in particular are encouraged to stuff their emotions and not display them publicly. We're taught to keep a stiff upper lip, be brave, be strong, don't cry, mask our feelings, “man up.” Showing emotion is often seen as a sign of weakness. This is so *incredibly* unhealthy. Many men have buried or suppressed their deep and very real feelings of anger, grief, or sadness, but what inevitably happens is that those emotions eventually come boiling out, often in ways that harm other people. Much violence happens simply because men don't know how to manage or express their emotions in healthy ways.

So, my heart. How's *my* heart doing, in the wake of Sheren's death? I did have some time to prepare for the possibility that Sheren wasn't going to make it. That helped. It also helped when the family agreed to let Lori come see Sheren in the hospital too; that gave Lori and me the opportunity to compare notes and share our grief with each other. The day after Sheren died, I was very sad. The next day I felt fine. But the day after that, I felt *profoundly* sad, awash in a wave of grief that I couldn't escape. *I had to let myself feel that.* I spent some time talking with someone I trust about how painful this was and how I wasn't sure I would be able to make it through her memorial service. That helped *a lot*, though I was still sad. The next day – Saturday – I had time to relax and read some fiction. That was therapeutic. Sunday morning I came here and sat in a pew like a normal person. That felt really good.

Earlier this week I removed Sheren's name from the list of staff in the bulletin. That was hard, but necessary. We can't pretend that she's still on the church staff when she's not. However, I did leave her on the staff list on the church website, for the time being, along with a brief note indicating that she recently passed away after serving faithfully here for eighteen years. I'll need to remove that notice before we hire somebody new, but it's okay for now. My heart isn't quite ready to take that next step yet.

So by the time I got to Sheren's service on Friday, I was actually doing fairly well. I made it through the service. How? Because I hadn't been stuffing my emotions. *I had been letting myself feel.*

So my mind's okay, my body is healing, my heart is recovering. But what about my *soul*?

It's important to distinguish between the *heart* and the *soul*. These are not the same things. The soul, as I said earlier, is our connection to the divine. It's our *spirituality*. It's our relationship with *God*. How am I doing, *spiritually*? This is a question people in our society don't often ask one another. How are you doing *spiritually* – how is it with your *soul* – perhaps those are questions that we need to get better at asking one another. How is it going between you and God? That question gets to the heart of what we *think* about God, what we *believe*, how much *trust* we have in God, how much we *rely* on God in our daily living, what *questions* we're struggling with, how we *feel* about God, and so on.

Sometimes people seem to think that if we tend to our *heart*, we don't need to tend to our *soul*; or if we tend to our *soul*, we don't need to tend to our *heart*. These are two very different dimensions of our life, and it is important not to confuse them. Sometimes people come to a church for *emotional* reasons, not *spiritual* reasons, and then are disappointed when they feel like their emotional needs are not being met. It's really not the job of the church to tend to people's *emotions*. That's what counselors are for. Seriously. That's *their* domain. That's what they are trained and licensed to do, to tend to your *heart*. The church is here to tend your *soul*. We're here to help you build your relationship with *God*.

That brings me to our scripture passages this morning. Let's start with the Gospel. Jesus heals two people, a twelve-year-old girl at the point of death, and a woman who had been suffering from a flow of blood for twelve years. The circumstances are different; the end result is the same: both are restored to health. To tend to our *soul*, there are some questions we need to wrestle with: Why do children die? Why do people sometimes get terrible diseases and afflictions? Why do *some* people experience healing, and others don't? Does God care for *all* people, or just *some*? Why did the woman and the father have to *seek Jesus out*? Why does it seem like God answers *some* prayers but not others? So many people were praying for Sheren. Why didn't God heal *her*?

You see the difference? There's aren't questions about our *heart*, though they may relate to how we are feeling. Sometimes when there's a death, people get *angry* at God. They *blame* God; they start to feel that God isn't *trustworthy* or *good*. They may not be aware that people have been wrestling with questions about why there is suffering and death for a *very* long time. The Bible gives some answers in various places. One of the most explicit is in the Wisdom of Solomon, one of the books of the Apocrypha. Regardless of whether you consider this book "holy scripture," I find the answer it provides very compelling: "God did not make death, and he does not delight in the destruction of the living." That is a very *bold* statement. "God created us for incorruption and made us in the image of his own eternity, but through an adversary's envy death entered the world."

*Death is not God's fault.* Neither is the decay of the human body. Things like the little girl's untimely death, the woman's flow of blood, or Sheren's untimely stroke *are not the work of God.* All the diseases and afflictions people suffer from – cancer, heart disease, Alzheimer's, diabetes, the list is very long – *God is not responsible for any of that.* There are other forces at work in the universe. Death entered the world, this book says, “through an adversary's envy.” Most translations render that as “through *the devil's* envy.” Other books in the Bible say similar things. If you are one of those people who blames God for the death of someone dear to you, please hear me: *it is not God's fault.* Do you like to be blamed for things that aren't *your* fault? Don't do that to *God.*

The book of Lamentations makes a similar point: “For the Lord will not reject forever. Although he causes grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; for he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone.” God, this suggests, sometimes does bring people grief, but there are reasons *why.* Lamentations was written in the wake of the violent destruction of Jerusalem. It was a *terrible* time in Jewish history. Jews came to understand that what happened was the direct result of their own sinfulness. The suffering they experienced wasn't *God's* fault; it was *theirs.* Sometimes there *are* reasons why bad things happen. Sometimes we bring them on *ourselves.* Sometimes we make choices that *do* lead to our own suffering, pain, or even death.

But what does *God* do? God loves us with an enduring, steadfast love, *no matter what.* “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end.” Another truly remarkable affirmation. “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” This isn't some pithy platitude meant to bring us hope *apart* from the hard realities of life – no, this is a bold affirmation that comes *right in the midst of deep despair.* Some Israelite poet could look around at all the tragedy and pain their country was experiencing, and *still* boldly proclaim: “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end.” True faith is faith that endures even in the *hardest* of times.

It is not always easy to feel God's steadfast love when you are going through a tragedy. God's steadfast love like the sun. The sun rises *every single day* – even when it's cloudy, where *we* are. The sun is *always shining* – even when it's night, where *we* are. Some part of this planet is *always* basking in sunlight. Likewise, *the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases.* It's *always* there, even when it's hard to feel. When it's cloudy, *I don't question whether the sun is still up there.* I know it's there; I've had it drilled into my head since childhood that the sun is constantly burning brightly. What we need is to have it drilled into our heads equally clearly that *the steadfast love of the Lord* is also constantly burning brightly. It *never* goes out. Sometimes, from our vantage point, depending on what's going on, we have a hard time *sensing* it. We just need to remind ourselves that it's *there.*

So how's my soul? My soul is *fine.* I had to remind myself periodically over these last few weeks that the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, and that God's mercies never come to an end. Sometimes, it was hard to *sense* that, but deep down I *know* that. Even in the midst of all the heartache of Sheren's stroke and subsequent death, *God's love still endures,* thanks be to God.

So that's how *I* am – in heart, soul, mind, and strength. How are *you,* in each of those?

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