

FIFTH
SUNDAY IN
LENT

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John 12 20-33 Jeremiah Fifth Sunday in Lent 2015
The Rev. Stephanie E. Parker

Written on Our Hearts

"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 the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more."

I don't think I can think of a much more hopeful phrase than that. In the multitude of the ways our lives, our loves and our hopes might pass away, God always stands ready to make all things new; to forget forever the way we wound, betray, or ignore God's hope for us!

God's word is written on our hearts. The divine essence is the substance of our creation. If this is true—we might rightly ask—why do we still have the capacity to wound one another so badly?

The simple truth is that God's will and hope for us never, ever trumps the gift of free will that God has given us. This is very, very important for the human family to grasp and trust. God's word is written in the innermost chambers of our hearts, but free will is just that, our ability to say NO to God anytime, anywhere, any place or circumstance.

To wed our will with God's, to give up our hearts of stone, means we must surrender our need to self protect and to live out of fear and instead open ourselves to heartbreaking truth that life is short and someday we all must die—just like the grain of wheat that falls into the earth.

What might we be able to do if we lived that truth each and every day of our lives? Would we risk love a bit more if we trusted that God's word of hope, joy, and mercy. The truth is, and we forget this all the time, we are never promised length of life, but we *are* promised that the *way in which we live* can give us eternal life now.

Eternal life now means we live our lives in such a way that we love, laugh, forgive, accept forgiveness, open ourselves up to show great courage in the face of adversity and that we get up every time we get knocked down by defeat or loss.

Each time we fall God gives us the ability to get back up with hope and reject the bitterness that hurt can bring and instead resolving to love more than before, forgive more than before, and say "thank you please may I have another!"

If we fully grasped that in order to live we must die what I call our "first death"—which is death to our selfish fears and desires. And then we must accept our second death which is inevitable. As Morrie of *Tuesday's With Morrie* fame said as he was dying of ALS, to learn to live we must first learn to die.

If we could fully embrace this life giving riddle I wonder if we would we forgive more generously, would we laugh more frequently, would we spend ourselves more freely in acts of justice of beauty?

As I've reflected on this all week I keep coming back to the story of a little girl named Elena Desarch (Desserich) whose story was shared on national news several years ago now, but has never left me.

She was just turning 6 when she was diagnosed with pediatric brain cancer. The doctors told her parents that she had less than a year to live.

As her illness progressed she turned to drawing and as a matter of fact, one of her drawings now hangs in the Cincinnati art museum. Pretty soon the tumor robbed her of her ability to speak, but she would not be silenced. She expressed herself to her family in notes and drawings.

And while her writing skills and language were limited by her age, her ability to convey love and light were not. She knew how to write I love you and spell Mom and Dad as well as how to spell her little sister Gracie's name. Many of her notes were simply pages filled with hearts spiraling in every direction.

255 days after her diagnosis, Elena lost her battle with cancer, but even death could not steal her ability to love those she left behind. Days after her death her parents began to find little notes hidden like secret treasures all over the house.

They were stuffed between books, hidden in briefcases, placed in dresser drawers, and even in a Christmas ornament box---there were letters and drawings to her parents, her grandparents-----her great Aunt's dog, and especially to her little sister, Gracie.

One message to her little sister was just a simple little line that said, "Gracie, I love you, go, go, go."

These messages were on scrap paper, post-it notes, and big paper hearts she had asked her mom to cut out for her months and months before. There were hundreds of them. Soon it became clear that this brilliant and beautiful child had planned a way to let her family know that somehow everything would be okay.

Elena's story is one that I think has the capacity to cripple us with its heartbreaking sadness. But if we look closer, we have to marvel that so much life and love was packed into six short years. Her life- light burned so brightly that even death could not take its glow. Her family is still held in her embrace.

Now I deeply believe that God, Elena's family, and everyone who knew her wished that she had had far more years on this earth, but her short life demonstrates what the God-given human potential for life and love really is.

Elena was extraordinary, but I also believe that God offers that potential to love and live without fear to each and every one of us each and every day.

When we offer ourselves to this life held in knowledge that God's word is written on our hearts---meaning our very will---and that we, like Jesus, can be as God to our world---- I believe that then our ability to feel God's presence and see God's astounding beauty everywhere increases beyond measure---even amid the pain and suffering that life can deal everyday. We keep waiting on the world to change, forgetting that change begins with each and every one of us. From the way we are with one another in community all the way up to how we respond to the global community---waiting for others to change instead of looking at our own hearts and minds is a prescription for continued misery.

God's word is written on our hearts. I think that to become fully human, as God created us to be, means simply being aware of this unassailable truth and then allowing this truth to guide our lives. Somehow a little 6-year-old girl knew this--- and her short little life overflowed into eternity with every note, paper heart cutout and her will trust joy until the end.

I can't claim that her courage changed the world, but it sure inspired me. Like dominoes falling in succession once one is tipped, our little moments of courage, hope, and grace in the face of suffering and pain can cascade into our world like the ripple effect.

Do we have the courage to open ourselves to God's hope and not protect ourselves from it---will we allow ourselves to be changed and transformed from within.

Will we allow ourselves to be renewed and made free, not apart from the suffering that surrounds and fills us, but in the midst of it? Jesus has shown us, in the flesh, what living this life looks like. Dare we follow him to his death in order to truly live?

Amen.

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