

Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
March 21, 2021 – Elizabeth Bryce

Readings: John 12:20-26
Jeremiah 31:31-34

Sermon: A New Heart (Lent 5)

What is your favourite love story? I asked a friend of mine once. I was looking for something to watch on Netflix (or might even have been on my way to a video rental) - I think it was Valentine's Day. This friend of mine was a film lover, an incredible reader, and a world traveller – I thought she would have some great suggestions. So I asked her: What is your favourite love story?

Sophie's Choice, she said. And I said Whaat? Sophie's choice is about war, it's about Nazi's and concentration camps and lovers who are doomed to fail because they are so traumatized by the genocide! That is a war story, not a love story."

She refused to reverse her decision. "It's a film about a mother's love – and how, when she is forced to choose one of her two children over the other, that choice breaks her heart wide open. She becomes so utterly vulnerable that all she has left is to love and to be loved. You asked, and I'm telling you - Sophie's Choice is my favourite love story."

Well, needless to say I did not watch Sophie's Choice that Valentine's Day or to be honest any other day. Like my friend, the first time I saw it, which was back in 1982, it felt like their tragic story literally broke my heart in two.

I remember it took me several days to recover. Now that I am actually a mother, and could not help but put myself even more in Sophie's shoes, I was afraid my heart might break wide open and that I might never be able to be whole-hearted ever again.

Of course, it is impossible to protect your heart from heartbreak. If you are in relationship with anyone – a family member, a relative, a lover or a friend, even your fur-family as we call our pets. They work their way into our hearts, and when they are gone or taken from us, it feels like our hearts have been broken apart. It feels like the end, and **it is** on one level, but it is also a new beginning.

So what is your favourite love story?

One of my favourite love stories comes from the Bible. It is the story of the love between God and God's people. In the 6th century before Christ, Jeremiah the prophet looked out over his people Israel, and his heart broke. Jeremiah was struggling to find hope in the midst of Israel's predicaments: Jeremiah's family of faith had been led astray by greedy kings who did not listen to God. The palace's shady relationships with other, stronger, competing empires led to a Judean nation that was under siege by the Babylonian army. Children were dying of starvation before Jeremiah's eyes, and before long most of the beloved community would be shattered and marched in shackles and

chains to exile in a foreign land. The walls of Jerusalem would soon be shattered. The temple would soon be destroyed and desecrated. There was literally no hope.

And yet the prophet Jeremiah preached hope to his people. There will be a new covenant, a new chapter in your love story, he said. You and God will fall in love again, and this time it will be for keeps. It will not require contracts or pre-nups or honey-do lists. This covenant will be written on your hearts, and you will trust one another and you will love one another.

Jeremiah gave them the hope of a new heart.

Sometimes, love stories are hard – they are heart-breaking.

Today we mark the International Day to end Racial Discrimination. On this day forty-one years ago, a peaceful protest was being held in Sharpeville South Africa. The goal of the march was to gather in front of the police station and hand in their pass-books. These were the books that all South African people of colour were forced to carry and show to the police in order to “pass” from one area to another, whether it be to work in white neighbourhoods or visit a relative in the next community or to attend a family funeral. By handing in their pass books, the African people were saying: Your apartheid rules are illegitimate, and we will not play by them.

It was a large crowd, and a racist police station – so the police turned to violence, opening fire into the crowd to disperse them. Sixty people were killed. Twenty-nine of them were children – and many of those children were shot in the back, as they tried to run away.

How many hearts were broken open **that** day? How many mothers and fathers, and lovers and children and grandparents and best friends lost their loved ones in a most unspeakable way. How many hearts were crushed.

Worst of all, there was little hope of any change. The South African government did not take responsibility, blaming what they described as a violent mob. And it took six years before the United Nations could gather enough momentum to condemn the massacre. But it was the start, the start of other nations taking another look at South Africa, pulling out their investments, questioning their representatives on global networks, refusing to let their sports teams play in the Olympics.

It still took another 20 years before apartheid began to be dismantled in South Africa. Many many more hearts **were** broken by violence and imprisonment and racism. Meanwhile people like Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela were preaching and talking about hope – they were very much in the tradition of the prophet Jeremiah. A seed of hope was broken open. Richard Bott our moderator has written a prayer for this day, calling us to break apart our own hearts, that we might dismantle the racist attitudes and the unexamined privilege we might not see in ourselves.

This week we heard the Vatican pronouncement that the Roman Catholic Church would not be blessing same gender unions or recognizing their marriages or even changing their definition of those relationships as anything but sinful. There are Roman Catholic parishes and priests and teachers and leaders whose hearts were broken open by the rejection and hurt of that pronouncement.

We might hope that some would turn to a more inclusive and affirming church like ours.

But I also know many Catholics who will not leave their churches because they are so committed to seeing it change – whatever it takes, however long it takes – they will be the seed broken open, they will continue working from the inside – because of their understanding of love that is truly loving.

Its right there in the gospel: *Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. John 12:24* They are hoping for a new heart.

Here's another love story:

One of the congregations that my partner Paul served, Heritage United Church in Regina, had a kind of theme hymn. It was called "A New Heart". The hymn was written by the music director, Diane Taylor Neal, and Ken Powers, who had been their minister. It was written in tribute to a member of the congregation who, over 30 years ago, received an actual new heart through a heart transplant.

Now, for every heart transplant survivor, we know there is always an organ donor – someone who didn't make it. Another family whose heart was broken wide open because their loved one died – and usually in quite a sudden and tragic way. But even though organ donation was not as well-accepted then as it is now, they chose that tiny seed of hope, that someone else might live because of their loved one's last gift.

It was pretty tricky surgery back then, not as widespread as it is now. Waiting for a heart, the man moved from Regina to London Ontario, where the surgery had to be done – he was removed from both his family and his family of faith for some months.

Every week, as the congregation remembered him in prayer, and supported his family, their hearts were broken open with the separation and the fear of what might happen in both the waiting and the healing time, still in London. It was a long time before he could return to Regina.

Diane and Ken wrote this hymn so that his faith family could welcome him home. We are going to hear the whole hymn in a minute, but here are some of the words:

**God gives a deep assurance
to people in despair
When the future feels uncertain
and no one seems to care,
The word of God comes ringing
to still our deepest fear.
A new heart I will give you,
A new hope for today**

**A new heart and a new hope
And strength to walk the way.**

As people of faith, it is fair to say that we live and we move in the world with hearts that are always broken, because we love in the way that God loves, and we are aware of the suffering of God's children. And yet we continue to love with hope: Hope that the shackles and chains of injustice might be broken. Hope that the outsiders and the marginalized might find a place in the circle of belonging. Hope that the separated might be brought home together again.

Thanks be to God, for every healing of our brokenness and for the new heart that keeps us faithful. Amen

Thanks to Diane Taylor Neale and Carla Dorwart from the Heritage congregation who recorded A New Heart for us.