



“SHIFT AND FLOW”
SCRIPTURE: HEBREWS 10: 11-25
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
November 14, 2021
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Hebrews 10: 11-25

10:11 And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins.

10:12 But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, "he sat down at the right hand of God,"

10:13 and since then has been waiting "until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet."

10:14 For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.

10:15 And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us, for after saying,

10:16 "This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their **hearts**, and I will write them on their minds,"

10:17 he also adds, "I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more."

10:18 Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.

10:19 Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus,

10:20 by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh),

10:21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God,

10:22 let us approach with a true **heart** in full assurance of faith, with our **hearts** sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

10:23 Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.

10:24 And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds,

10:25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

The Word of the LORD.
Thanks be to God.

How is your heart?

How is the strong muscle that beats inside you to keep you going, to keep you alive?

And how is your heart?

The soft animal inside of you who yearns to love and be loved, who drinks in beautiful moments, and feels the weight of sorrow and stress.

How is your heart?

Our heart is where the preacher in the Book of Hebrews tells us God has implanted our blueprint as a human family--that's where God etches our best possibilities.

Written in our hearts, scripture tells us, is wisdom about how to live in right relationship with God, with each other, and with ourselves.

Every second of every day our hearts are beating with a desire for life and connection.

Every second of every day, the Divine and mysterious dream that gave birth to this world is moving through us over and over again--etched in our hearts, creating the conditions for us to be fully alive in our bodies and in our communities.

Our hearts truly bear the marks of a magnificent vision. How much do you pay attention to the intricate wisdom that lives at the center of you?

How is your heart? Check in. Be gentle. Be honest.

You might put your hand on your heart, right at the center of your chest (not to the left), as we take time to pay attention to what is happening inside of us right now.

(play video)

FULL SCREEN VIDEO | “How the Heart Works” (end at 3:06 with “look after it!”)

If your hand is on your heart, leave it there a bit longer. If not, you might try it with us for just a moment.

The heart is actually located almost in the center of the chest, between the lungs.

A wise friend commented to me once that the fact that Americans put our hands in the wrong place over our hearts during our national anthem is telling--we don't know where our heart is as a country. The heartbeat of our life together is out of rhythm with what human hearts really need to thrive.

Jesus was about healing hearts--about calling us in to tend to each other's hearts. Faith is really all about tending to our true hearts--the hearts that yearn for a better world--for love, for life, for delight and for compassion, for exertion and for rest.

“Your heart beats about 100,000 times in one day and about 35 million times in a year. During an average lifetime, the human heart will beat more than 2.5 billion times.

Give a tennis ball a good, hard squeeze. You're using about the same amount of force your heart uses to pump blood out to the body. Even at rest, the muscles of the heart work hard—twice as hard as the leg muscles of a person sprinting.

The aorta, the largest artery in the body, is almost the diameter of a garden hose. Capillaries, on the other hand, are so small that it takes ten of them to equal the thickness of a human hair.

Your body has about 5.6 liters of blood. This 5.6 liters of blood circulates through the body three times every minute. In one day, the blood travels a total of 12,000 miles—that's four times the distance across the US from coast to coast.

The heart pumps about 1 million barrels of blood during an average lifetime—that's enough to fill more than 3 super tankers.

How is your heart?

Because your heart is built to survive a lot of stress. And your heart needs you to pay attention to how heavy the load can be sometimes. A deep breath is a gift to your heart--a wash of oxygenated blood that flushes your system with the possibility to regenerate and recalibrate once again. Like nature's way of giving us mini-blood transfusions when we're weary or worried or worn out by carrying the loads we carry sometimes.

The preacher in Hebrews asks the church--how is your heart?

The preacher in Hebrews wants to know if you realize what Christ accomplished for our hearts--a blood transfusion of cosmic proportions--new conditions for our hearts to thrive.

I'll be honest, the way "the blood of Christ" has been talked about for so many centuries and generations in Christianity does not feel life-giving to me. It hasn't for a long time.

Being "washed in the blood of Jesus" is language tied punishment for sin. Someone had to pay for all the awful things that human beings have done. Someone had to pay for ways human beings broke our relationship with God and with each other.

Jesus was the sacrificial lamb, the scapegoat for our transgressions. The one who paid the debt, the one who suffered and died in our place.

Is any of this sounding familiar? If you've been around Christianity much at all, I bet it is. This is the language of substitutionary atonement.

And it's the theological diet we've been fed in the Christian church, particularly in Western culture, for generations and generations. So much of who the Church is and how the Church moves in the world flows out of this way of understanding who Jesus the Christ was and why he had to die on the cross. We've heard it so much, over and over again, that we may not realize that atonement theory is just one way of explaining Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. But it is not the only way.

And I believe, I feel in my heart, that is not the best way. In fact, I believe that atonement theory has hurt our hearts, damaged our capacity for the kind of love that Christ pours into us through the sharing of his blood.

Christ shows us the truth about ourselves--the way we brutalize truth tellers, the ways we try to kill the truth with cruelty and violence, the ways we deny and defend, the ways we shame and blame. He shows us all those things in the way powerbrokers and practitioners of piety reacted to him and wanted him dead.

In that way he lays bare the sins of the world--he lifts the veil in his own flesh, as the preacher in Hebrews says. He is an apocalypse, an unveiling of what's true, a revelation of what we need to admit about ourselves in order for healing to be possible.

And Jesus accomplishes something else that we miss if we see him as the final sacrifice, the scapegoat who pays the price of our sins. His blood is not spilled, his blood is shared, infused into our own blood, soaked into the ground of our being, given freely because of perfect love.

And this word for perfect that the preacher in Hebrews uses here does not mean blameless or morally pure. This word is about completeness.

Jesus' blood accomplishes what it does because it is the completeness of his full experience of what we experience.

We suffer, we bleed, we die. Without sharing in those human experiences, Jesus would not fully understand us and Jesus couldn't fully save us from ourselves--from our self-destructive habits, from our anguish at how withering life can be, from our fear of being abandoned, unlovable, betrayed, forsaken.

Gregory of Nazianzus, one of the Cappadocian Fathers--a theologian of the early church in 4th century Greece, put it this way. "That which is not assumed is not saved."

Jesus creates the conditions for our hearts to work the way God made our hearts to work.

In fact the preacher in Hebrews is very clear--guilt and shame are superficial and misplaced emotions for us. Christ is patiently waiting for us to believe that and live like it is so.

Our passage began today with the preacher talking about the tediousness and ineffectiveness of a priest doing the same cultic act over and over again--these

acts prove their own ineffectiveness, the preacher says, by their need to be repeated day in and day out.

I feel the truth of those words--how churches can get stuck doing the same thing over and over again, thinking we are being faithful, righteous, when we are really just spinning our wheels and exhausting our hearts.

Jesus is waiting for us to look up from our stupor and see him patiently holding space for us in a very different kind of sanctuary. Jesus is waiting for us to enter a sanctuary where we trust that we are truly wanted and embraced--enter it with confidence, the preacher says, with a full heart, with a full assurance, with a clear conscience.

We come to the sanctuary by a new way, a way created by the vitality and promise that Jesus' shared blood fills us with.

That new blood makes our hearts healthy, strong, able to withstand exertion and wise about when to rest.

Yesterday, I watched the sunrise at the ocean. My heart took me to Wilmington to be there with my friend, Jerrod, who has had to say goodbye to his 38 year old wife, Molly, who died of COVID several days ago.

Jerrod is brother to Melva, a member of Grace Covenant's staff. And Jerrod is also a close friend of Amy Kim, another GCPC staff member. We gathered outside of St Andrew's church yesterday afternoon for Molly's funeral--masked and as if returning from battle. I watched friends and colleagues I hadn't seen in so long gather like the wounded and the weary ones that we all are. So much has happened since we saw each other last. It is impossible to absorb it all or find language to describe it.

When I got out to the ocean yesterday morning as the sun was rising, several hours before the service was to start, I was overcome by seeing her--Mother Ocean. My soul has been so thirsty to hear her and feel her--to soak in the vibrations of her current and her magnitude.

I've been going to the ocean on the Carolina shore since I was 18 months old. And for many years, John and I had a home at Sunset Beach. We spent several weeks every summer there while he was coaching in the NFL and college. Honestly, those weeks every summer made our family's heart strong--those days of losing track of time and playing in the sand and taking a nap on

the beach while the ocean washed us in that primal sound of tides moving in and out--those days are etched in my heart, in my soul.

The tears poured out of me like they had been waiting to see Mother Ocean again to trust that they could freely flow.

Those tears were about everything--John's cancer and how our family has changed since those days at the ocean, the shifts in my parents lives, the intensity of leading a congregation through COVID, the weight of COVID, the exertion and deep work of disrupting the cultures that have formed us in America... I could keep listing things. It was everything, all of it, in my tears.

The ocean water washed over my feet and I felt the sand moving under my feet. I felt myself sinking as the tide washed in and out.

Yes, Mother Ocean, that is how I feel--standing firm and the ground shifting under my feet and You, Mother of us all, flowing and moving, washing and gestating, welcoming me back to a place of truth. I feel things shifting and I feel things flowing.

I asked you how your heart was at the beginning of this sermon. It's only fair that I tell you how my heart is, too.

My heart is strong, Grace Covenant. Strong enough to break when things hurt and strong enough to trust when things are hard. Strong enough to love each and every one of you and to believe the work we are doing together as church is Spirit-led. Strong enough to keep moving the blood Jesus has shared with us all around my body and around this gathered Body.

We are shifting and we are flowing. Washed in the blood of Christ.

So let us encourage one another, all the more.

Our heart is strong, Grace Covenant.

Thanks be to God.

