

Heart Matters

In the name of him who equips us to stand steadfast and strong against the evil one, dear friends in Christ: Some words can interact in funny ways. Take the two words “heart” and “matter” for instance, and the different ways you can put them together. If I spoke of “a matter of the heart”, you’d interpret that to mean something that had to do with feelings and emotions, an issue in which personal affections might override one’s thinking and better judgment. But if, on the other hand, I spoke of “the heart of the matter”, you’d understand that I meant the most important thing, the idea or issue that is most central. And one more: if I spoke simply of “heart matter”, you’d take that to mean the actual stuff a heart is made of: the muscles and tissue that make it up. Interesting, isn’t it? They’re the same two words, but depending on how you put them together, you can mean three very different things. And the reason I mention this is that today’s reading from Deuteronomy deals with all three: matters of the heart, the heart of the matter, and plain old heart matter.

The first is definitely a matter of the heart; the heart of Moses, to be precise. He’s come to the end of his journey, and he knows that very soon he will face the end of his life. He’s led the Israelites in the wilderness for forty long years. And now, camped on the plains of Moab, all that remains for them to do is to cross the Jordan River and begin taking possession of the Promised Land. But Moses can’t go with them. On account of particularly ill-timed outburst of temper on his part, he’s been disallowed entry by the Lord. And it’s breaking his heart—not, as you might guess, because he wants to enjoy for himself the abundance and comforts of the rich land that lies ahead; but rather because it means leaving behind these people that he has come to care for so deeply.

To be sure, there were many times when they practically drove him insane with all their complaining and bickering. He was often amazed at how faithless and foolish they could be. On more than one occasion he complained to the Lord, “What have I done – how have I offended you – what great sin did I commit – that you put me in charge of all these whining babies? Why do you hate me so much? Why did you sentence me to be like their mother having to carry them to Canaan?” And yet after forty years of dealing with them, he’s learned to care for them. He’s led them through thick and thin. He’s patiently taught them. He’s prayed for them. When they rebelled and the Lord was angry and threatening to destroy them, Moses interceded for them. In a sense, he has become their parent. And like a parent, he loves them. And he’s very concerned about their future. He knows only too well their propensity to stray from the ways of the Lord. And that’s why he wants to go with them. He wants to continue to give them the strong, caring, loving leadership they need so that having come all this way and having taken possession of the land, they don’t lose it through their faithlessness.

But he can’t. The Lord has said no. And despite Moses’ insistent pleading, the Lord won’t change his mind. And so it is with a heavy heart that Moses speaks the words of today’s text. He tells the people, “I can’t go with you. I can’t continue to lead you. And so I’m going to do the next best thing. I’m going to direct you to what is most important– to the very heart of the matter. Therefore listen to the statutes and rules that I am teaching you today, and do them, that you may live, and go in and take possession of the land that the Lord, the God of your fathers, is giving you.”

Moses understands that their future, their lives, their continued possession of the land all depend on their careful adherence to the things that he received from the Lord and that he has since taught to them. It's what connects them to the Lord and makes them his people. It's what guarantees their future. It's supposed to be what defines them as a nation and keeps them separate from the pagan world around them. And so Moses is giving it to them again. He's reviewing every detail of the Word that he received from the Lord because that's what they must zealously guard and keep foremost in their lives. Without it, Moses knows, they'll be lost. They'll lose their way. They'll lose their inheritance. Ultimately, they will lose their God and their life in and with him. And when they lose that, they'll be lost forever. And this is really what the whole book of Deuteronomy is: Moses retelling all of the things the Lord has done for his people and what he's commanded them to do – the statutes and rules he wants them to follow – so that they will continue to be the Lord's chosen people after Moses is gone.

And we want to be careful about how we understand this. When we hear words like statutes, rules, and commandments, we tend to think strictly in terms of moral Law, like the Ten Commandments and all the other stuff the Lord told his people to do and not to do in order to behave properly. To be fair, that is part of it; but there is so much more that the Lord revealed through Moses. In fact, the commandments of God that address questions of right and wrong only make up a tiny portion of what Moses is referring to. I mean, the Lord knew very well that his people (like all people) were sinful. And laws, no matter how good and just they are, cannot make sinful people stop sinning. Telling you to love your neighbor as yourself shows you what the Lord's standard is; but it doesn't empower or equip you to actually do it. And we don't. No, God gave his people the moral laws to show them what the perfect standard is in order that they would see that they didn't live up to it. He gave it to them so that they would see that they were sinners – sinners in constant need of his grace and forgiveness.

And that's what the majority of the teaching the Lord revealed through Moses is: not moral laws, but ceremonial laws – the rules and statutes that governed things like worship and atonement for sin. They are the means whereby the Holy God could live among his chosen people despite their sin. They're the means by which the Lord in mercy forgave the sins of his people. So in Lutheran terms, they aren't Law, they're Gospel. And what we're talking about here are the Lord's directions concerning the Tabernacle, the priesthood, the sacrifices, the annual festivals, and so on – all of which were about God's forgiveness and care, and remembering – reliving even – the great events of salvation by which the Lord rescued his people from bondage, made them his chosen children, and brought them to the Promised Land. More than that, they were the means by which the people were brought into communion and fellowship with God and by which they shared in his holiness.

This is what Moses wants the people to guard and keep so steadfastly. And he warns them not to add to it – not to come up with man-made schemes to supposedly do even better than what the Lord has taught (that's pretty presumptuous). Nor are they to subtract from what the Lord has revealed, as if some parts of God's Word don't matter or that he didn't mean what he said. Moses knew very well that there would come along people who wanted to do one, the other, or both – there always are. They were to resist such temptations and hold fast to the Word of God that he taught them *exactly as he taught them*.

And Moses envisions this to be an ongoing thing. The people were to keep on hearing and listening to the Lord's teachings. The Word of God was to be constantly in their ears and thus filling their hearts. Why? Because Moses, like Jesus in today's Gospel reading, knew precisely what's inside the human heart: "evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, pride, foolishness." This is the matter

that fills our hearts. It is, in a sense, what the heart is made of. And thus it needs constantly to be suppressed, covered up, and washed away with a steady stream of God's wholesome and cleansing Word.

By way of illustration, I lived for a while near the coast at the mouth of the Salinas Valley in California. It's called America's salad bowl because year round they grow lettuce and celery and all the rest of your garden greens. They've got a very mild climate and some of the richest soil in the world. And to grow crops year round, they need to irrigate. The water comes mostly from wells. And that can create serious problems. You see, the usable ground water flows under the soil down the valley. It's fed by rain and snow in the distant mountains. When it comes near the coast, because fresh water is lighter than salt water, it rides up over the top of sea water that saturates the soil there. So at shallow depths the ground water is fresh, but down deep it's quite salty. And when they get an especially dry year, there's less fresh water pushing the salt water down and away, so the reach of the salt water encroaches farther up the valley and higher in the soil. The result is that one week you could be pumping fresh water on your crops, and the next week from the same well if the conditions are dry enough, it could be sea water. And I don't need to tell you that sea water is death for most vegetables. No, you need plenty of fresh water constantly flowing down the valley to keep the salt water down where it belongs.

But that's the way it is with our hearts. They're like those wells. If we don't get a steady supply of God's teaching and his cleansing and forgiving Word, then our hearts will bubble forth with all that nasty stuff we're struggling to keep down. And like salt water on crops, what comes out will poison and destroy our relationships with the Lord and with one another. It's simple: to keep the Word of God, to keep it active and effective in our lives and to live in God's grace, we need to keep hearing the Word of God.

And not just for ourselves. There are other matters of the heart to consider. Just as Moses cared deeply for the children of Israel, so also the Israelites and we too have people we care about: principally our children and grandchildren and their generations which are yet to come. This is why he tells the people to make all these things known to their offspring. True, we cannot believe and trust in the Lord for them; but we can give them the Word of God. We can patiently teach and explain it. We can demonstrate how it is for us the most important thing and try to impress its infinite value upon them. But one thing's for sure: we can't give them what we do not keep ourselves. Those who forget the things of the Lord, who let his Word slip out of their hands, or who show by their indifference and neglect that it really doesn't matter much to them, very often end up condemning their children and grandchildren to the same horrible fate.

These heart matters are very serious business. They were to Moses, and they ought to be to us as well. Even more to us, I should say. For Moses dealt with types and shadows, biblical pictures that only pointed ahead to the person and work of Jesus Christ and his atoning work on the cross for our salvation. We, by contrast, have been given the fullness of the Gospel. We have the washing of Holy Baptism. We have the Holy Spirit dwelling within us. We have the complete Word of God and his sure word of forgiveness. We have the Supper of the Lord's body and blood. We have the Church and its ministry. And we've been blessed with each other: fellow members of Christ and made one body in him. We need to take all these very serious matters to heart and ensure that we guard and keep them precisely as we have received them, and leave them as our legacy for our children and the generations to come. The Lord grant us the will and the means to do this. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!