

An Undivided Heart

Psalm 86

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Psalm 86 is the prayer of one who has turned to God over and over again throughout the ups and downs of life. Each and every step of the journey the psalmist has found God faithful. Because of that the psalmist writes, “I trust in you.” Having experienced the love and forgiveness of God, the psalmist is led to pray to God in good times and bad. One expression of the faith of the psalmist is that he has come to realize there are no other gods. The God of Israel is incomparable. “For you are great and do marvelous deeds; you alone are God.” All of which leads to a beautiful prayer that is made more beautiful by the simple request of one who desires to love God completely. “Give me an undivided heart.” (Psalm 86:11)

That prayer to love God with an undivided heart is one that traces its roots back to the sweeping command God gives to his children in Deuteronomy 6:5. “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” All your heart is just another way of saying an undivided heart, and the psalmist is praying for just that, an undivided heart.

The idea of loving God is one that we speak of often in the church. What we sometimes don't realize is that the understanding of God's love is developed slowly and gradually through many years of relationship and many pages in the biblical narrative. We have fifty chapters in the Book of Genesis, but it is not until the 15th chapter of the second book in the bible, the Book of Exodus, that we are introduced to God's actions in terms of love. There are four references to God's love in Exodus, phrases such as God's unfailing love, (Exodus 15:13), God showing love (20:6), God's abounding love, and God's maintaining love (34:6,7). There are two references in Numbers to God's abounding love and God acting in accordance with his love (Numbers 14:18,19). But it is not until the fourth chapter of the fifth book of the Bible...it is only after 156 chapters in the bible that the actions of God on behalf of Israel are identified as actions done because God loves Israel. In Deuteronomy 4:37 Moses says, “Because God loved your ancestors he led them out of Egypt....” We hear it again in Deuteronomy 7:8, “It was because the Lord loved you that he brought you out of Egypt.”

After what amounts to more than 500 years of Israel's relationship to God, and more years than you can imagine when you trace God's history with humans from the beginning, a story that has been going on for 156 chapters spanning 162 pages in the bible, it finally is spelled out for Israel that all this...all this, from the blessing of Abraham to the deliverance from slavery, from the parting of the Red Sea to the bread in the wilderness, from the water spewing out of a rock to the commands being written on stone and placed in the hands of Moses on Mount Sinai, all this...all this, the cloud in the daytime and the pillar of fire by night, leading the people, guiding their journey, step by step, all this...the Promised Land that is flowing with milk and honey, all this...God saying to Israel, "I will be your God, and you will be my people," all this is because God loves Israel...because God loves human beings...because God loves you and me. Deuteronomy reveals that all this is because God loves us.

So it begins to make sense that after this long and well-developed relationship, when God finally spells out in words that are crystal clear, saying, "Because I love you...I did all this," it is then that the Book of Deuteronomy reveals God's desire for Israel to respond in kind. Deuteronomy four reveals that God did all of this for Israel because God loves Israel. Deuteronomy chapter six spells out what is surely not only an appropriate response, but the right response. "Love the Lord your God...who did all this...Love the Lord your God with all your heart." Love the Lord your God with an undivided heart.

Sometime in my childhood a teacher or my mother or my father or an older brother or older sister sat with me and read a story about a heart that is undivided. The image of that undivided heart grabbed hold of a special place in my heart, and I can't read this story without thinking of it as a beautiful image of loving with all your heart, of loving with an undivided heart. Just seeing the cover of the book takes me to a cherished place. The name of the book is "The Giving Tree."

Once there was a tree...and she loved her little boy.

And every day the boy would come and he would gather her leaves and make them into crowns and play king of the forest.

He would climb up her trunk and swing from her branches and eat apples. And they would play hide-and-go-seek. And when he was tired he would sleep in her shade. And the boy loved the tree very much.

(Note: A heart is carved in the tree with the initials Me and T.)

And the tree was happy.

That is a pretty wonderful description of an undivided heart...there was a tree and she loved a little boy...and she showed that love in many ways, through provision, kindness, goodness, playfulness, and simply being present and always available. She loved her little boy...and the boy loved the tree. The boy had an undivided heart.

In Deuteronomy God and his precious child Israel are set to begin an adventure in the Promised Land that will be filled with blessing and joy, peace and contentment. When God declares his love for Israel and then calls for that same type of love to be given in return, the possibilities seem endless.

- Did God envision the old days, the days in the Garden of Eden, when he walked with his first children in the cool of the evening, enjoying each tree, each blossom, each vine, each river, each stream, literally each and every breath of a life that was good, a life that was right, a life that was true?**
- Certainly God envisioned regular family gatherings. God set aside one day a week with the only requirement being no one had to work...a day for rest and re-creation...a day for worship and a day for celebration. God planned an annual calendar where the whole family would get together to have feasts, feasts to remember the plantings, the firstfruits, and the harvests. There would be a huge campout when everyone would live in tents for a week to remember the many years they slept in tents as they wandered in the wilderness. There would be days when the trumpet would sound and there would be a ceremony to experience in fresh and new ways God's forgiveness, the Day of Atonement. And there would be the Passover, the solemn and yet joyful celebration of the night when God passed over his children and set them free by a mighty act of power.**
- God set Israel up to be a people who rejoiced with glad and grateful hearts. He gave them trumpets and harps and lyres, he supplied them timbrels and set them free to dance, he brought out the strings and the pipes, and to cap it off he dusted off the cymbals, the loud crashing cymbals, and said, "Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!"**

In Deuteronomy God and his precious child Israel are set to begin an adventure in the Promised Land that will be filled with blessing and joy, peace and contentment. When God declares his love for Israel and then calls for that same type of love to be given in return the possibilities seem endless. Oh Israel, all you have to do is love your God with an undivided heart.

One of the challenges in reading Deuteronomy is the overwhelming sense that Israel is not up to the task. There are hints that Israel will not be able to love God with an undivided heart. There are warnings that temptations will arise that will threaten to divide Israel's heart, to pull them away from God, to involve them in practices that harm their relationship with God, and to even engage them in giving their love to idols and false gods that are in no way, shape, or form remotely equal to the great and mighty God named Yahweh. The worst thing in it all is none of these idols or gods love Israel. Israel trades in her loving God for false and unworthy gods and idols and lusts and desires. Deuteronomy, a book that displays all the blessings that will come if Israel will but love God with an undivided heart also portrays the devastating disaster that awaits Israel if her heart becomes divided. What Deuteronomy predicts in such stark terms is what Israel ended up experiencing as they turned from God. Knowing what could have been is heartbreaking. Knowing what eventually became of Israel is equally heartbreaking. All because Israel did not love God with her whole heart. All because Israel did not love God with an undivided heart.

That little book I learned to love as a child, that book about The Giving Tree, it takes a sad turn. It doesn't end with a little boy and a tree loving each other and living in endless bliss. The tree keeps right on loving the boy, but the boy...his heart grows divided. He had carved into the tree a heart and in the heart were the initials ME and T. But as he grew older he drew a second heart, and in this second heart along with his own initials, ME, there was a new set of initials. No longer was it just ME and T. His heart grew divided. So the story goes...

As the boy's heart becomes divided he leaves the tree to make his way in the world, and when he returns, the tree is always so happy, so overjoyed to see her boy. But the boy doesn't come back because he loves the tree. He comes back to take something from the tree. He returns as a young man and takes her apples. Later as a middle aged man he takes her branches. As he ages he cuts down her trunk and uses that for a boat. All that is left of the tree is a stump. The boy's divided heart leads to a tree that is nearly destroyed, which is just about what has happened to this once beautiful relationship. And then at the end of his life, the boy returns one final time.

The tree has no more apples, no more branches, no more trunk. The tree is just a stump. It is bittersweet to see that all that remains on the stump is the little heart the boy once carved that says, ME and T. Now at the end the boy comes back...all those other things that led him to have a divided heart...desires, wants, dreams, houses, lands, fame, fortune...they didn't last, they didn't satisfy, they faded, and they failed.

And after a long time the boy came back again.

“I am sorry, Boy,” said the tree, “but I have nothing left to give you—My apples are gone.”

My teeth are too weak for apples,” said the boy.

“My branches are gone. You cannot swing on them—“

“I am too old to swing on branches,” said the boy.

“My trunk is gone, you cannot climb”—

“I am too tired to climb.”

“I am sorry, I wish that I could give you something...but I have nothing left. I am just an old stump. I am sorry...”

“I don’t need very much now,” said the boy, “just a quiet place to sit and rest. I am very tired.”

“Well,” said the tree, straightening herself up as much as she could, “Well, an old stump is good for sitting and resting. Come, Boy, sit down. Sit down and rest.”

And the boy did.

And the tree was happy.¹

In some ways that could well be a metaphor for our relationship with God. Maybe that’s the best we get...we turn away, beg, borrow, steal...until tree is just a stump. But at last we get it. At last we realize there is nowhere else to run, nowhere else to hide, nowhere else to turn, and nowhere else to be loved. There are no more apples, no more branches, no more trunk, nothing left but just a stump. And that stump is the core, the essence of God, the very heart of God. That stump is love. And when all is said and done, when we have exhausted everything else in life, we return and find the stump is there. God’s love is there. That is a story we find in Deuteronomy. After all the predictions of Israel’s failure and Israel’s faith that will be false and the foreboding sense that Israel will not be up to the task of loving God with an undivided heart, God speaks words of his commitment, words of his faithfulness, words of his undying devotion, and words of his never ending love. Way at the end of Deuteronomy God says, “I will never leave you, I will never forsake you.” You might not love me with an undivided heart. But I will never stop loving you.

Maybe when it is all said and done and we have exhausted every option and burned every bridge and explored every dead end and detour and dark alley, maybe when it is all said and done we will limp back to God and find an old stump. And that stump is there for us. God’s love is there for us. I sure hope people know the church is a place they can come when they have

¹ Shel Silverstein, *The Giving Tree*.

exhausted every other option. Living with a divided heart tears you up and can leave you broken and battered. It can happen in a hundred ways. One of the ways that is ripping lives apart right now is the addiction to opioids. Nicholas Kristof captured some of the desperation people experience in these few sentences.

Innumerable people with addictions whom I've interviewed haunt me. One was a nurse who became dependent on prescription painkillers and was fired when she was caught stealing painkillers from a hospital. She became homeless and survived by providing sex to strangers in exchange for money or drugs. She wept as she told me her story, for she was disgusted with what she had become — but we as a society should be disgusted by our own collective complacency, by our refusal to help hundreds of thousands of neighbors who are sick and desperate for help.²

I admit I'm not sure how to help people in these desperate situations. But I hope you will agree with me that at least we can be a place where people can come when they are spent, wasted, battered, and beaten down. I hope we can offer them a stump, and say, "Here, sit here. Sit with the God who created you, who loves you, and who will never stop loving you. This is a safe place for you. We welcome you in the name of our loving God." Maybe that is all we have to offer when everything is said and done. A stump where you can sit in safety and know you are loved.

And yet maybe that is not all we have to offer. You see, when we come to image of a stump, it is indeed something that is cut down and cut off and has no ability to grow again...on its own...in this world...by the powers we possess. When Israel was completely worn out, when all their seeking after false gods and idols and pursuing all their pleasures and putting themselves first, when Israel had been rejected and sent into exile, when they were far from home and with absolutely no reason to have any hope, the Lord sent words of hope through the prophet Isaiah. They were words about a stump.

"A shoot will come from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him..." (Isaiah 11:1,2) Jesus was the shoot that came from the stump of Jesse. Jesus was descended from the line and lineage of David, the son of Jesse. And the Spirit of the Lord rested on him. And the voice of the Lord said, "This is my Son whom I love. With him I am well pleased."

² Nicholas Kristof, "Fighting a Drug War the Right Way," NY Times, June 22, 2017.

This Jesus brought life where there had only been death. The lame, the leper, the blind, the sinner, the outcast, the lost, and the lonely, they all found that from a stump there could be new life. And when all the forces conspired against him and cut him down, when they cut him down to a stump, when they hung him on a stump, an old rugged cross, from that stump a shoot came forth. God brought Jesus back to life, and the miracle of it all is that through the death and resurrection of Jesus, God brings life to people who are broken down and hopeless and crushed. Those words we heard earlier in the service from the letter to the Romans are more than words. They describe a life that is vibrant and full, and that life is in Jesus Christ. If we died with Christ we believe we will live with him.

Maybe a stump is not all we have to offer. Maybe there is new life. Maybe there is a new beginning. Maybe the prayer of the psalmist can be our prayer, today and every day. There is a God who said, “You shall love the Lord your God...you shall love me...with all your heart.” There is a God who wants us to love him with an undivided heart. And God wants that from us because God has given that to us. All this...this incredible gift of life, of faith, of hope, of forgiveness, of God’s kindness and gentleness, all this is because God loves us. And he proves that love by dying on a stump. Through that stump, through Jesus Christ, we have new life. Friends, let us join together in loving our God with an undivided heart.