“***I Will Write Them on Their Minds***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, Dec. 19, 2021

**Hebrews 10:5–9, 16**

5Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, “Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; 6 in burnt-offerings and sin-offerings you have taken no pleasure. 7 Then I said, ‘See, God, I have come to do your will, O God’ (in the scroll of the book it is written of me).” 8When he said above, “You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt-offerings and sin-offerings” (these are offered according to the law), 9then he added, “See, I have come to do your will.” He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. . . 16“I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds.”

**Luke 1:39–45**

39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 40where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. 45And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

Welcome to the fourth Sunday of Advent, where the theme is love. God is love, our Scriptures say (1 John 4:16). They also say God is Spirit (John 4:24), and God is our heavenly Father (Matt 23:9; John 20:17). These are the theological foundations of our faith. Part of our love lesson is learning more about God. What does God, who created us in love, want from us in return? Love, of course, but how should we show our love for God? By what we say about God, and by how we treat people. When Jesus came here, he wanted us to gain a deeper understanding of God, beyond what had been known in Moses’ day and the prophets’ day. Let’s look specifically at today’s two Scriptures.

With the Hebrews passage, did you notice that the author attributes the Old Testament quote to Christ? This is not the only time that Hebrews assigns Psalms to Christ’s authorship, but it *is* the only time that he cites an anti-sacrificial saying. Many of us refer to the author as Hebrews, since the actual author is not known. There are numerous reasons to believe that the author is *not* Paul, despite the fact that the African church assigned it to Paul. This passage is odd because it contrasts with Hebrews’ sacrificial theology; he describes Christ as functioning as the priest over his own self-sacrifice (10:10–14). Yet, the author feels the need to embrace the moral theology of the prophets who critiqued the sacrificial cult. He quotes Jeremiah, “I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds” (10:16; quoting Jer 31:33). Hebrews accepts Jeremiah’s and Isaiah’s point that inward spirituality is more important than the sacrificial ritual system. If the law is written on someone’s heart, that person practices love and justice without needing to make offerings. *This* love lesson eliminates the need for sacrifice.

Christ, in his teachings, will pick up on the older prophetic insight and take it further. He reveals a whole new approach to God, not based on needing to appease God with sacrifices, or impressing God with our ritual holiness, but with taking on God’s nature and letting it be written upon our minds. Our relationship with God is entirely changed as a result. Believers no longer need to be threatened or disciplined. Their obedience is voluntary and energetic, not reluctant or frightened. It changes everything in people’s lives. It changes their approach to parenting, no longer feeling a need to use fear or force in the raising of children. Love and communication will be enough to ensure the child’s loyalty.

Love between cousins (Luke 1:36), or at least relatives, is part of the story in the gospel this week. The pregnant Mary visits her pregnant relative, Elizabeth, and as soon as Mary says hello, the child in Elizabeth’s womb leaps (1:41). Elizabeth knows that Mary’s child is destined to be her Lord, and refers to him as such (1:43). She also praises Mary for believing what was promised to her (1:45). It’s a very spare story, but we can imagine the shared joy of the two pregnant women, each carrying a child that was promised beforehand by an angel.

The emphasis on Mary believing the promise is an important detail. It implies that the spiritual law is written on Mary’s heart; she intuitively trusts it and acts upon it. Those who have the law written within are instinctively loyal and trusting. They do not need to prove their loyalty or convince God of their loyalty through ritual “sacrifices and offerings and burnt-offerings and sin-offerings” (Heb 10:8). Hebrews says that these, the first law, are “abolished” and are replaced by the second law (10:9), that is, the new covenant, in which the law is written on the heart (10:16). This new understanding of our relationship to God was true then and remains true today.

Do we have stories today that show, in action, the law in the heart? The Salvation Army office in Sanford, Maine was broken into and a burglar stole $1,700 from the safe. Three local businessmen heard about this and they donated $1,700, each, to that office (https://www.goodhousekeeping.com/life/inspirational-stories/news/g5124/random-acts-of-kindness/?slide=3). The law in their hearts said to make good the loss, but it was tripled because three Good Samaritans stepped forward. A spiritual law in their hearts became manifest on earth. Our actions *do* have consequences. What spiritual fruit do *you* have, perhaps fully ripened and ready to be manifested?

God would instruct us in spiritual living, in such a way that it becomes second nature for us, so to speak. We instinctively trust and love. We are no longer drawn to sinful ways or imbalanced passions. We have learned to be consistent and reliable. A harsh and demanding law is not necessary when loyalty is voluntary. This is loyalty that is born of love, love of the true, the beautiful, the noble, the good, the just. Loyalty to these supreme values *is* loyalty to God, to a noble and good understanding of God.

When you think about Jesus and what you admire about him, isn’t it one or more of these qualities? Don’t you love him because of his compassion for the little people, the discarded and despised people? This makes you realize that God is also compassionate and kind. Don’t you love him because of his love of truth, his refusal to compromise with the Pharisees and Sadducees to win favor from them? This makes you realize that God is fair and not corrupt. Don’t you love him because of his gentleness toward women when others wanted him to be harsh, like toward the woman who anointed his feet, or the woman caught in adultery, or even the Samaritan woman who dared to talk to him in public? It is because of our appreciation of gentleness and fairness that we appreciate when Jesus was gentle and fair. These values are part of our concept of God. And it is thanks to Jesus that we dare to think of God in these ways. This is no accident. Jesus wanted to change the way we think about God. And he succeeded, both in his own ministry and in the ministry of his apostles and successors who have carried his message forward.

God has written these loyalties not just on our hearts but on our minds. How we think about God, how we reason about God, has been shaped by these values that we hold most dear. The church father, Gregory of Nyssa, wrote “If the soul becomes clean of all evil, it will exist entirely in beauty. The divine is beautiful by its own nature. The soul will be joined with the divine through its purity, adhering to that which is proper to it” (<http://andrewarndt.com/the-purifying-fire-of-divine-love-gregory-of-nyssa-on-the-purification-of-the-soul/>).

Let us make divine beauty and truth what is proper to our own nature, letting them be written on our hearts and minds. Let us share family love, as Mary and Elizabeth did, but also share the love that goes the extra mile, outside the family. Love is the greatest motivation for living.

Anthony DeGuilio underwent surgery in 2008 to give his kidney to a stranger who needed one. The husband of the woman who received the kidney was moved to donate his kidney to another patient, and that person’s father then donated a kidney to someone, and *that* person’s sister then donated a kidney. It was a gratitude-inspired cascade of selfless giving that saved numerous lives ([41 Random Acts of Kindness That Will Restore Your Faith in Humanity - Good Samaritan Stories (goodhousekeeping.com)](https://www.goodhousekeeping.com/life/inspirational-stories/news/g5124/random-acts-of-kindness/?slide=23)).

Two travelers who were visiting temples in Myanmar or Burma got lost, and then their jeep got a flat tire. A four-year-old boy on a bicycle came by and saw what happened. He put his hands on his head and said “oh!” They had no language in common, but the boy got them to follow him on foot to his home, where he explained the situation to his dad, who was then able to go down, repair the puncture, and redirect them to the main road. They were no longer stranded ([17 Stories about Random Acts of Kindness from All over the World - Bobo and ChiChi](https://www.boboandchichi.com/2016/08/17-stories-about-random-acts-of-kindness-from-all-over-the-world/)). They have a strong affection for the Burmese people now.

In our actions, our love intentions will spread out in waves, perhaps tripling the effect. Let the wave of love begin. And let it begin with you! Receive God’s love for you, and multiply that love by sharing it with another.