

Hammer my heart

A hazard of being a pastor is that you can speak and write endlessly *about* God and rarely open yourself to be encountered *by* God.

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Anyone who writes or speaks or puts themselves out there in the public square in any way knows that people are often quite happy to offer feedback. Sometimes this feedback happens to be critical. Occasionally even constructively so. Other times it's, well, not. This little delight, for example, made it's way into my inbox as I was composing this paragraph. It's in response to a piece I wrote about refugees a few years ago:

How many God and Jesus hating ragheads have u moved into ur guestroom, another idiot preaching to sovereign Americans? Really? Anger would be wasted on mental illness u self righteous pontificating communist I bet the answer is zero!

Lovely.

Happily, there are other times, too. Times when people offer words of affirmation and encouragement, words of kindness and appreciation. We seize upon these words like a dog on a bone. God knows there are enough nasty, ignorant, and abusive words flying around these days (see above). A kind word can sometimes seem like a brilliant ray of light flickering amidst a vast and depressing expanse of darkness.

I got into my office a few weeks ago and noticed what is becoming an increasingly rare sight in our age of instant online communication: the office phone with a light flashing indicating a voice message (What's next? A fax?). It was from an older

woman who had recently visited our church as a guest scripture reader. I had met her before the service. She was polite, kind, articulate, elegant. Her reading was precise, polished, clear. She sat, attentively and with perfect posture during the service, and left the church not long after it was over. I didn't think much about her after that. I was glad that she had come and grateful for her contribution, but I didn't expect to hear from her again.

But then, the flashing light, the message. She told me that she had wanted to tell me this after the service, but there wasn't time, that she had appreciated my words, that she appreciated my perspective, that she was challenged and convicted, that she was glad she had come. I listened in somewhat bewildered gratitude. I hadn't felt great about the sermon, to be honest. It was about the beatitudes in Matthew 5 and the "foolishness of the cross" in 1 Corinthians 1—two absolutely marvelous texts—but I didn't feel like my words had done justice to the subject matter. But this woman evidently felt differently. She concluded her very kind message with these words: "So thank you, again, for your words. They really hammered my heart ... in a good way."

I sat there for a few minutes and pondered those words. *They really hammered my heart.* It struck me as just about the best compliment I had received in some time. I could think of few better things for words—mine or anyone else's—to accomplish. And it got me thinking about hearts and hammerings. Her wonderful little phrase launched me off into two directions.

First, in an age where we are constantly enjoined to "trust our hearts" or "follow our hearts" or "be true to our hearts," this woman's expression reminded me of the simple truth that our hearts need an occasional hammering. They need to be pounded into shape. They need to be broken and remade. They need to be changed and judged and refined and trained and turned toward higher ends than ourselves. Our hearts are not infallible guides in our pursuit of truth and beauty and meaning and identity and [shudder] authenticity. Our hearts can be small and selfish things. They can lead us badly astray. Sometimes they need to be hammered with words like, "blessed are the poor in spirit ... the meek ... the merciful ... the pure ... the peacemakers ..." and "For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength" in order to function as they ought to. Sometimes our hearts are the *last* thing we should be true to. Not until they've been hammered into something resembling their proper shape, at any rate.

The second thing I thought was far more personal and far more indicting. When, I wondered, was the last time my heart received a good hammering? One of the occupational hazards for someone in my line of work is that you can speak and write endlessly *about* God and rarely open yourself to be encountered *by* God. It's so very easy to reduce Jesus and his way to a brand to reinforce or an institution to defend or an intellectual system to expound or (God help us) a political ideology to justify. As a religious professional, you're supposed to be the authority, right? You're supposed to explain all this God-business to people and to do so in compelling ways. You're supposed to have all the answers and applications and anecdotes. Before long, Jesus can become a kind of reference manual to pull out each week in order to get the job done, but not much more.

And all the while your heart becomes less than what it could be, what it ought to be.

You forget that your heart is in no less need of a good hammering than anyone else's. Indeed, perhaps the hearts of religious professionals like me need to be hammered even *more* often. Perhaps we are more prone to the pride that makes the heart shrink, the craving for praise that makes the heart hollow, the detachment that makes the heart atrophy, the anxiety that makes the heart fearful and protective. Perhaps our hearts, more than any others and more *often* than any others, need to be hammered with Jesus' words and his way.

I have thought of this woman's message often over the past few weeks. I even transcribed it so the words could look up at me—and confront me, if necessary—from the corner of my desk. When my eyes wander over to the little scrap of paper, I often pray a very simple prayer. *Hammer my heart, Lord Jesus Christ.* And then I pray that I would be bold and open enough to let the hammer fall.

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