

**WRITTEN ON THE HEART**  
*Sermon for Lent 5B – Jer 31:31-34*  
LPC, 3/22/15

Do you remember the scene from the musical *My Fair Lady* where Eliza Doolittle, after months of coaching, finally gets the correct pronunciation of “The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain”? Or perhaps the climactic scene in *The Miracle Worker* where the deaf and blind Helen Keller, in response to tireless teaching on the part of Annie Sullivan, mindfully says “Wa-, wa-,” after her hands are splashed with water?

These are both scenes where constant drilling in the mechanics of something finally becomes internalized. Can you think of any similar point in your life? For me I can think of a point in learning to ski where I finally got the idea that my weight should be over the center of my skis and my focus needed to be straight down the hill. This discovery was fundamental to my becoming an accomplished skier.

The interesting thing is that both these techniques, leaning forward, and looking straight downhill, regardless of whether I was turning to the left or to the right, are counter intuitive. When you think you’re going to fall forward, as you do at the top of a slope on slippery skis, your instinct is to lean backwards. Your instinct is also to look in the direction you are currently headed, rather than the direction of your ultimate destination. But countering both those instincts is the key to fluid skiing. As a matter of fact, until you make those practices intuitive which are initially counterintuitive, you will not advance.

Here’s another example from my own life: singing. In the case of singing, as opposed to skiing, I can’t really identify the point at which the breakthrough occurred. For years I would just gaze at my music and learned the melodies I was supposed to sing by listening to the people around me. Then one day I realized I was actually reading the music. Now, my music-reading is not perfect; I don’t have perfect pitch. But I can now hold my own in most first-time choral rehearsals.

Experiences like these are my association with something “written on the heart,” as in today’s Old Testament lesson, where the prophet Jeremiah says that God intends that people will no longer obey the written law, but follow the law because the law has become written on their hearts. Obeying the written law is like practicing: like doing your drills or your scales or your stretches or your barre work. Then one day you discover you can do difficult things without thinking about it, because the muscle memory created from repeated drills has made the motion natural.

God intends that we should follow God not because we have to think about what God has told us to do but because God’s ways have become second-nature to us.

Every Sunday during Lent we have been reciting the Penitential Order, with its repetition of the Ten Commandments. I’d like to refer you to the end of the Rite I version on page 318 of the Prayer Book. The response to the final commandment is “Write all these thy laws on our hearts we beseech thee.”

Something happens to a “law written on the heart.” It may start out as a law, something obeyed because of loyalty and duty or sheer determination, but one day it becomes something that is done because it’s *who you are*, or rather, *who you have become*.

Think about the way the Ten so-called Commandments are worded. They all start out “Thou shalt...”. We usually understand that “Thou shalt...” means “Thou must...”. But there is another way to look at this. “Thou shalt...” can also mean, “If you love me, it will show because you will...” In other words, “Thou shalt keep holy the Sabbath day,” really means, “If you love me, it will show in your lives because you will keep the Sabbath day holy.” Read down this list and think of these “Commandments”: “If you love me, you will not commit adultery, because you will understand what it is to keep faith with another person.” “If you love me, you will not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor because your treasure will truly be in heaven.”

Now, think about people who have done heroic things. When they are asked how they could have plunged into freezing water or entered a burning building or stood up to a bully on behalf of someone weaker, they often say something like, “It’s just what I do,” or “It’s how I was brought up,” or “It’s just what any decent person would do.” That is because God’s law of putting oneself on the line for love has been written upon their hearts. Doing what they did is part of who they are.

We know that some people are just good. But most of us have to practice. We have to do our drills. And sometimes it may seem as if we will never be really good. But if we keep practicing, some day, we may notice that we are loving God and our neighbor without thinking about it. And this is our constant prayer.

One day Eliza suddenly started saying “rain” instead of “rine.” One day Helen realized that the word “water” spelled out in her hand signified the cool, wet substance that came from the well pump. One day I realized that I could make sounds from my mouth that represented, approximately, the notes on the page.

Now, sometimes, through the grace of God, this kind of thing happens instantly, without a lot of effort on our part. But a lot of the time, we have to practice and practice and practice. And we may never be the best at what we’re trying to do. But that’s not the important thing. The important thing is to be willing for God to make us into the kind of people God wants us to be. And for a lot of us that takes constant practice.

Here’s the thing. Sometimes the drills are counter-intuitive, like leaning forward over your skis and facing the valley. But to advance in our journey we have to overcome our so-called natural inclinations and take a risk and follow the instructions we are given, as I followed those of my ski instructor.

We must trust our instructor. We must be willing to turn our intentions, our intuitions, our instincts over to one who has our best interests at heart, God. Then God’s interests will become our interests, and God’s laws will be written on our hearts.