

"Follow Your Heart?"

Mark 7:14-23

August 30, 2015

14th Sunday After Pentecost

You've probably heard the phrase. Maybe you've spoken the phrase. It's right off a Hallmark greeting card and is heard from Christian and non-Christian alike. When confronting confusion, searching for guidance, wanting to know what is best to do, people will use this phrase: "Follow your heart!" This folk advice sounds so innocent and encouraging. Instead of looking for standards and opinions outside of yourself, this pithy saying encourages us to look within ourselves – to our hearts – to find the right option to choose, the right path to take, or the right thing to do.

What's wrong with following your heart? According to Jesus' words in our text, following your heart to make the right decision is a very foolish, potentially life threatening decision which can cause us great harm.

To "follow your heart" reflects several misguided and non Biblical assumptions. First, it assumes that our heart is good and a reliable source of advice and guidance. This comes from the assumption that we are all basically good people. We come into this world basically good or, at least, neutral. From our good origin, we develop good hearts that are trustworthy in guiding us and our decisions.

The second assumption is that evil originates outside ourselves and corrupts us. If we can just stay away from evil things, evil people, and evil actions, then our hearts can remain pure and we can follow them and be good people who do good things. This was the whole idea behind the Jewish dietary laws. They believed that eating the wrong food from the outside would contaminate a person on the inside. Jesus locates contamination, or defilement, in a different place when He said, "There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile him, but the things that come out of a person are what defile him."

What did Jesus mean? Like the disciples, you may be confused. Jesus explains it in a very blunt way. Can unclean physical food defile you spiritually? No! Jesus says, "Do you not see that

whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?” In other words, food goes into your stomach, not your heart. It doesn't affect your soul, but goes out of your digestive system and into the toilet.

Jesus goes on to say that it is NOT what comes into a person that defiles him or makes him sinful, but what comes OUT of him that does that. He says, “For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

This harsh declaration flies in the face of most people's understanding of good and evil. Evil is not something that originates “out there” somewhere and plagues poor little innocent you and me. Evil originates inside here – as a result of our sinful nature – and means we are, by nature, sinful and evil people. Therefore, our hearts are not reliable sources of guidance and decision making. They are evil and full of sin and lead us into evil and sin. To say, “Follow your heart” when it comes to spiritual and moral matters is like saying, “Drink from the sewer” when it comes to beverage and nutritional matters. Our hearts are, by nature, spiritual sewers from which come all sin and evil and can only lead us down the path to death and hell.

To take the Word of God seriously in this matter seems to leave no hope for us. Moral reform of our hearts on our part with the hope that it will somehow improve our standing before God and make them more reliable sources of guidance is simply foolish. It's like trying to treat raw sewage with the hope that you'll get clean drinking water. It just won't happen.

Yet there IS hope. But the solution cannot come from within us – from within the spiritual sewer which is our heart. The solution for our situation must come from outside ourselves – from someone who has a pure heart and can do something about our filthy hearts. The only solution we have is Jesus Christ.

God has taken your stinking foul sin which comes out of you from your heart. He took it away from you and put it upon Jesus. Jesus suffered the pain and punishment of death on the cross for

you and endured its stench in order to cleanse you of your sin. He got rid of the stench of death for you by rising from death to spread the sweet aroma of life and salvation to the world.

By Jesus' death and resurrection, God is able to do more than just correct a few flaws and help you do better. To do just that – to make some external modifications and improvements – would do you no good if your heart remains the same sewer-like source of evil. It reminds me of when I bought some golf clubs in Nebraska. I asked the person selling me the clubs if they would improve my game. He answered, "New clubs; same old swing." New external equipment would not help me if old internal skills (or lack thereof) remained the same. I would be fooling myself if I thought a mere external change would improve my golf game.

Spiritually, it's the same thing: "new behavior; same old heart." If we think that just changing our external lives while retaining the same old heart is going to help us in the long run with God, we are sadly mistaken. We are fooling ourselves if we think that a few tweaks in our behavior will save us as long as our heart remains corrupt.

This is why God does more than simply forgive us individual sins and provide us with an example for moral behavior. He recreates us and makes us wholly new creatures from the inside out, starting with new hearts and ending with new behavior. Through the prophet Ezekiel, the Lord says, "And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules." (Ezekiel 36:26-27)

This is what God is doing in Holy Baptism. In your Baptism, you were joined to Jesus' and His death for sin. You were killed and joined to Jesus' burial in a tomb. But you were also resurrected to new life in your connection to Jesus' resurrection. You were given new life to replace your old life of sin. You were given a new heart from which to live that new life. You were given a new Spirit – the Holy Spirit – to replace the spirit which had control over you before your baptism, namely, Satan, and to guide you in the new life that flows from that new heart.

Do not live by “following YOUR heart.” As Jesus says, from that heart comes only evil which defiles us. Live by following the NEW heart which has been given to you in your baptism. The challenge is knowing the difference.

“Following your heart” may not SEEM to be bad. Evil can be very deceptive by seeming to be good. The Word of God says, “Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.” (2 Cor. 11:14) Following your heart may lead you to do things that are perfectly legal, widely accepted by our culture, and personally enjoyable, but are evil and contrary to the Word of God. In Jesus’ list in our text, while things such as theft and murder may be recognizable to us as evil, many of the others in the list are not. Evil thoughts, sexual immorality, adultery, coveting, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, and foolishness seem perfectly all right to many people, even Christians.

Following your new heart – the heart of Jesus given to you in your baptism – is entirely different. It is not dependent on what feels right or what the culture says is right. The new heart is guided and governed by the Word of God and by the Word of God alone. Following your new heart means following the Word of God. The Word of God – and ONLY the Word of God – determine our priorities and our actions; our love for God and our love for neighbor; what is right and what is wrong.

Many restaurants have menus with “heart healthy” foods on them. The thinking is that eating the right foods will keep your heart healthy and a healthy heart means that you will live longer, more productive lives. The same is true with your new heart. It needs a “heart healthy” diet filled with the Word of God. This is why I make such strong appeals here at church for people to attend worship, Sunday School, and Bible Class. It’s not that my ego desires an audience to hear me preach or teach or because we want children to have something to do during Bible Class. It is so that all of you, young and old, may be fed by the Word of God, strengthening your new heart and allowing you to make “heart healthy” choices in how you live and behave when you are not here at church.

A seminary professor, when he heard someone say, “I gave my heart to Jesus”, replied, “What a perfectly awful gift.” This may sound a bit harsh when seen through the prism of our present day culture in which hearts are innocent and pure and thus reliable to be followed when determining

our choices and behavior. However, when seen through the Word of God, that response makes perfect sense. Our hearts are like a sewer, filled with evil, from which come only evil thoughts, words, and deeds. Who would want to give something like THAT to Jesus? More important than us giving our hearts to Jesus is Him giving new hearts to us. He earned those new hearts by His death and resurrection. He has given us those new hearts in our baptism. He nourishes and strengthens those new hearts through His Word. That heart – that new heart – is what you should follow. Amen.