

## "The Gift of a Heart"

Mark 7: 14-23

September 2, 2018

15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

A seminarian once asked his professor for his opinion of the phrase many Christians use to describe their conversion experience: "I gave my heart to Jesus." The professor paused and in his usual droll manner replied, "What a perfectly awful gift that is." At first blush, that seems a bit insensitive; a bit negative for something that was intended to be positive; a bit judgmental of something seems to be good. The truth of the matter is we get very sentimental about things related to the heart. This is reflected in the bulletin cover today – pretty hearts and lovely flowers. Why then would giving our heart to Jesus be such a horrible thing?

There must be something in the heart that would make it a good and a worthy gift to present to God. A few might believe that our hearts are pure when we come into this world or, at least, neutral – neither good nor bad. This is something philosophers would call *tabula rasa* - a blank slate. Such a neutrally pure heart would be a fitting gift for a pure God.

Others wouldn't go so far. They would say that humans, despite flaws and errors, have basically good hearts. They say such things as, "Well, no one's perfect," or "we are only human." Such a basically good heart might be a fitting gift for a totally good God.

Even those Christians (including good Lutherans) who believe and confess the sinfulness of humanity are not ready or willing to condemn the gift of a heart to God. After all, there's some good and bad in everybody, isn't there? A heart with at least some good in it would make an appropriate gift to God, wouldn't it?

People who want to dispute the professor's evaluation of the gift of a heart to God do so because they misunderstand two things: the holiness of God and the sinfulness of humanity.

We tend to think of God as being really really good, but, perhaps, not actually holy. Oh, He may be holy in and of Himself, but He surely cuts us some slack in our imperfection. Surely God will settle for our best efforts at being good. He will accept our explanations for ignoring His Word, refusing His invitation to dine with Him at His Table, refusing to love and serve our neighbor, and so on.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Not only is God holy in and of Himself, but He also requires holiness of His Creation. His Word has countless examples of God's anger burning fiercely against sinful people and destroying them for their sinfulness. There are also countless warnings that He will do the same to us and all sinners today.

We dare not think too highly of ourselves. Being basically good for having done some good is not to be equated with being holy. This is something quite difficult for modern man to handle. We have been raised in a culture where "pretty good" is good enough. Trying your hardest is acknowledged as being all that is necessary. Such is not the case with a holy and righteous God. Anything less than perfect is not good enough. Trying your hardest is not a substitute for completely obeying. Our hearts are

in no way suitable gifts because of the imperfect content of the gift or the holy nature of the one to whom we give the gift.

Now, we are tempted to cry, "Foul!" This is not fair! How can God expect us to have clean and pure hearts? In the modern "victim mentality", we see ourselves as victims of sin and not the cause of it. Why are we such sinful people? It surely can't be our fault, we may say. We might try to explain it in the same way that those in the medical field or legal field attempt to explain the behavior of criminals. We are sinners as the result of nature or nurture.

Nature means that we do wrong because we have been influenced by an evil culture or community. We couldn't help ourselves because of where we lived and with whom we interacted. The world around us is the cause of our sinfulness.

The other choice, nurture, believes that we do wrong because we were raised poorly as children. It was this poor nurture that turned us from being basically good children into the sinful human beings we are. Poor potty training when we were children led to sinful or even illegal behavior when we became adults.

We come to think that the solution to our sin and the cleaning up of our heart is by improving the environment in which we live so that the culture cannot influence us to sin. Or, the solution involves changing the nurture which we receive, both as children and as adults. Let us have more wholesome examples by which to live and imitate. If we can just cleanup the outside, then our hearts will become pure and fitting gifts for God.

This is exactly what the Jewish people thought at the time of Jesus. They were very concerned about outside appearances and actions. For example, they believed that if they ate just the right thing they would ceremonially pure before God. Conversely, if they did eat something considered to be unclean, then they would be considered defiled before God. Also, as we learned last week, if they wash their hands in a certain way, they could be spiritually clean, but would be spiritually unclean if they fail to wash their hands in the right way or at all.

They (and we) miss the point if we think this. In our text for today, Jesus explains what exactly it is that makes us unclean before God. He says, "There is nothing outside a person that by going into him can defile them, but the things that come out of a person are what defiles him."

Later on, the disciples asked for an explanation. Jesus says that it is not that which is on the outside and enters our bodies (like food, for example) which makes us unclean and sinful before God. Jesus asked them, "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, any food, clean or unclean, which we eat with our hands, washed or unwashed, simply goes in one end, is digested, and goes out the other end as waste.

In the same way, just as there is nothing from the outside that can enter us and cause us to be sinful, there is nothing from the inside that can exit us which causes us to be pure. Therefore, there is nothing in our heart that is good and pure which we can give to God is a worthy gift. Jesus' explanation is like a dagger in the heart (no pun intended). Our hearts are the source of the evil in our lives; they are not the victims of

evil. Your heart and my heart are cesspools of sin, not pools of purity. Jesus says, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, comes 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."

Giving God the gift of our heart is a perfectly awful gift. It is like giving someone a cesspool and thinking you were giving them a swimming pool. The human heart is the source of every dark and evil action or attitude. Now, someone might say that the answer is to try harder and do better. However, even our best pales in comparison to the holiness of God. Isaiah, the prophet, said, "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags." The prophet is very blunt and direct in his assessment. Even at our best – our very best – our actions are like used menstrual rags.

In view of this serious "heart disease," our heart is not only unsuitable to serve as a gift to God, but it is unable to keep us spiritually alive as Christians. To continue the medical metaphor, we are in need of a heart transplant. Our old hearts have failed us. We are in need of new hearts.

Obtaining a new heart is not easy. It is not something we can do on our own. Imagine trying to get a new physical heart without the aid of a doctor or the support of medical insurance. We cannot now nor ever be able to find a heart, surgically implant that heart, or ever be able to pay the huge sum of money for the entire procedure which, according to one source, averages \$1.4 million dollars.

It is even more impossible for us to replace the cesspool of sin and the source of all evil which is our heart and even more impossible for us to pay the cost of such a procedure if we could ever find such a heart. However, God, in His great love for us, gives us each a new heart. He doesn't demand that we cleanup our old heart first. He doesn't sell us a new heart on the monthly payment plan. Rather, He gave each of us that which we could not obtain on our own. Instead of us attempting to give our "perfectly awful" hearts to Him, He gives to each of us a brand-new heart. The prophet Ezekiel writes the following about the Lord's promise:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws." (Ezekiel 36:25-27)

God gives to us a brand-new heart in our baptisms. He sprinkles clean water on you and me, cleansing us from all our impurities. He replaces our heart of stone with a heart of flesh. He puts His Spirit in us so that our sin is replaced with His holiness; our evil is replaced with good; and our disobedience is replaced with obedience to His decrees and laws. With a new spiritual heart pumping His Spirit throughout our spirit, we have new life that will never die.

What's the cost for this great transplant and new heart? The magnitude of this operation makes a \$1.4 million price tag seemed cheap. No, this heart transplant

operation was paid for by something far more valuable than money. It was paid for by the Son of God, Jesus Christ who gave His life in payment for our sin; the ransom for our evil; and the redemption of us all.

As He approached death, Jesus cried out, "It is finished!" This meant more than the fact He was dying. This meant more than even His mission was done. The word Jesus spoke, in the Greek, literally means, "Paid in full!" There is no co-pay. There is no patient's portion left remaining. By His death on the cross, the entire cost was covered. By His resurrection from the dead, the receipt for this transplant was delivered.

How do you live with a new heart? You may say, "Now I can give my heart to Jesus." But how can you give something to God which is already His? We can't. Besides, He doesn't want it. He wants you to have it. Keep the new heart and live accordingly.

Be comforted by the fact that there is nothing in this evil world or in the power of the devil that can defile you before God. You don't have to worry about Jewish dietary laws or anything else making you unfit to stand before God. This world cannot crush your new heart. However, this also means we have no excuse. We cannot blame the outside world and its evil for our sinful actions. Each of us is responsible for his or her own choices. There is no blaming the world. There is no, "the devil made me do it." Be alert and aware to the fact that there is no way to escape sin in your lives since it is not from the outside which can be eradicated, but from inside which cannot be.

A heart patient in a physical transplant continues to live by taking care of his new heart through reading and researching information, exercising properly, and eating the right diet. He does this so that he might remain strong, healthy, and able to enjoy many more years of healthy living.

In the same way, as recipients of new hearts, we care for them in much the same way for the same reason. We read the Word of God to know how to keep our new hearts pure. We regularly exercise our new heart by attending worship, being involved in the study of the Word of God, and enjoying the fellowship of fellow Christians to keep our new hearts strong. We follow the proper diet of our Savior's body and blood in and with the bread and the wine of the Lord's Supper so that we might have the forgiveness of sins which keeps our new heart healthy.

Attempting to give our hearts to Jesus may be perfectly awful gifts because they are the source of evil in our lives and are full of sin. However, God has given to us new hearts which, in His sight now and at His judgment on the last day, are perfectly wonderful gifts because they are pure and devoid of sin. That is the only gift of a heart that really matters. And that gift is yours from your loving Heavenly Father. Amen