

Sermon by Pastor Tim O'Brien

April 2, 2017

Old Testament Lesson

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Gospel Lesson

Luke 18: 9-14

Wesley's 21 Questions – Condition of Our Heart

Once there was a little girl whose class was going to celebrate Valentine's Day and her teacher said that they should decorate homemade cards to exchange with one another. The little girl went home and counted out her paper to make sure she had just the right number. She carefully cut out her cards into the shape of a heart, decorated them and wrote her message on each one. She liked them so much that she even made one to decorate her desk. On the day of the party all the kids were so excited to share what they had made. However, when she showed up to class there was a new little boy sitting in the back, a new student whose family had just moved into town. When it came time to do the exchange, it was clear what was going to happen. Since all the kids had made just enough cards for the number of students in the class, there sat the little boy watching while cards were passed around him. Seeing this, the little girl grabbed her scissors - took her own heart off her desk and cut it in such a way that she created another smaller heart. Walking up to the surprised little boy, she said, "My mom and dad always tell me that if our hearts are full we need to share it, so we can fill it up again, so I want you to have a piece of my heart."

So, what about our hearts today? Not just physically, which I hope they are all great, but how are they spiritually – are they full? Are we ready to share them so we can be filled up again?

The condition of our heart is so important. We have been looking at Wesley's 21 questions that he wrote to deepen faith and help us walk closer to God. So, we started by examining our spiritual life by asking is Jesus real to me? Is Jesus a vital living presence in my life and then we looked at our character in how we honestly admit that we need God's help and strength in our lives. And today we look at the last set of questions [Read Questions]. All these questions deal with the condition of our heart that relates to our relationship with others.

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Now the word “heart” is one of the most common words used in the Bible. It is used almost 900 times in scripture. And in scripture when the word heart is used it refers to the inner person – to their mind, passion, emotions, and inner nature. We know this through our language when we say things like – my heart is broken – my heart just isn't into it – I really need to have a heart to heart talk - But more than that when scripture speaks of our heart, it is not just our inner nature but also our spiritual life in relationship with God and with others. And this is what John Wesley was interested in as he was focused on trying to ask those questions to get a person to think about where their heart is focused and what is influencing them. In other words what are they filling their heart with – with pride, jealousy, criticism, resentment or is it with faith, joy, grace and hope. In the words of our scripture for today we could ask - what is being written on our hearts?

In our reading from Jeremiah, we see how important the heart is to God – as we hear the hope given to the people of Israel in exile. Now God had a long relationship with the people of Israel. Centuries before he rescued their ancestors from Egypt and brought them into the Promised Land. He gave them the Ten Commandments to guide their lives and they built the great temple in Jerusalem to worship and praise. But again and again the people strayed – their hearts were not focused on God and so they created other idols to worship, neglected the poor and sick and suffering right on front of them, they supported leaders who were selfish and greedy, which allowed the people to be selfish and greedy. In time the people had strayed so far and became so self-obsessed, they didn't even notice their enemies at the gates.

Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian armies had streamed across the borders of Judah. God's holy city of Jerusalem had fallen. The city was burned and the people enslaved marched across the desert to the Babylonian capital. In this time of heart break and despair, Jeremiah the prophet now speaks God's word of hope and comfort, for the time to come: I will make a new covenant ... I will put my law within them and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God and they shall be my people.

When God declares to the people that he would write a new covenant on their hearts it was meant to show a change and deepening of their relationship. No longer would stone tablets and scrolls and words written on parchment do. No.

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Now it was time to be formed by a living relationship as we get close to the heart of God. As we let our hearts get sync with the divine heartbeat that surrounds us every day and in every situation:, “I forgive you.” “I love you.” “I will always be with you.” Because when we are in sync we don’t just know we are worthy and loved, we feel it in every part of us. That’s when our faith is not just some intellectual exercise of our heads but becomes something that moves us to share, to sacrifice, to freely give a piece of our hearts.

But how do we get our hearts in sync. Well, one of the questions Wesley asked was – do I compare myself to others? Which comes from our Gospel lesson in Luke where Jesus tells a parable to those who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else. [Show Video] And so the question is – Whose heart was in sync with God – Whose heart was focused on Jesus’ words of life that he was speaking – and is speaking to us today. What Jesus is teaching in this parable is that if we want to get our hearts in sync then we need to put our focus on God and in humility look at our own issues and sins that we struggle with and second - when we see others we need to stop comparing ourselves or focusing on their shortcoming or judging them in any way. Paul in his letter to the Romans said, “Therefore you have no excuse whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgement on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge are doing the very same things.”

And so what Jesus is interested in is for us to have a change of heart like that tax collector where we humbly and honestly focus on and pray for our hearts to be filled not with judgement but with grace - not with criticism but with understanding - not with irritability but with patience - not with fear but openness - not with distrust but with faith. And this happens as we repent - or turn around and let go of the things that are holding us down and pulling us off the path God wants to walk. We need to let the Spirit work in us – to help us get in sync - to daily form and shape our hearts into the pattern of Jesus’ love. This love shown to us on the cross where Jesus took all of our burdens – our sins – our failures – our pride – our brokenness onto his heart – so that our hearts might be changed and transformed as we see and feel the depth of this amazing love for us.

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Because we are given a choice – to either follow and focus on and pattern our hearts after Jesus as we daily walk with him or to go our own way relying only on our ourselves and our strength – letting life harden our hearts.

So let me tell you about two men – the first was a famous welter-weight boxer by the name of James Tony. He was known for his aggressiveness in the ring. He packed a powerful punch. He fought like a man that was possessed. One day a reporter asked him why he fought with such aggression - He said, it's because my dad abandoned me when I was a child. And he left all of my brothers and sisters fatherless and alone for my mother to raise by herself. And every time I step into that ring, I'll picture my dad's face on my opponent's face. I have such anger and I have such hatred toward him I just explode.

James just couldn't let go and it was a poison that grew year after year eating away at his heart and soul crippling his life. So, when his doctor told him he had to stop fighting because it was threatening his life he couldn't do it. He couldn't let go - so year after year he kept fighting until one particular fight he was knocked out, put into a coma and died.

But there is another path. So, let me tell you about a policeman in New York City, Steven McDonald, who tried to stop a robbery that was taking place in Central Park. He was shot by a fifteen-year-old teenager, Shavad Jones. From that day, thirteen years ago, Steven has not been able to walk and he is confined to a wheelchair. He has taken on a new vocation, traveling to grade schools and high schools speaking about the need to practice non-violence in response to conflict and problems. He tells his listeners that he has forgiven Shavad Jones, that in fact he forgives him every day, for everyday he must deal with the pain of his condition. He encourages children to sign a pledge of non-violence, a commitment on their part to not use aggression or hurt in their dealings with each other.

Shavad Jones was released from prison and, only several days after his release, was shot and sent to the hospital with injuries that changed the course of his life. Steven McDonald's third grade son went to his dad after hearing this news and asked a simple question from his heart, "Daddy, can we pray for this man who hurt you?" You see, Steven, in humility had given his life and heart to be shaped and formed by a larger love. He had let go of his anger and pain and regret to find

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peace. But more than that – as his heart changed it effected his son and all those around him. For when the love of God touches our hearts – it touches everything and everyone around us. We find that we are filled to overflowing to reach out to the lost and least and lonely – to share a piece of our hearts. We find the strength to let go and reach out to those who have hurt us with forgiveness – we find the faith to look out at this very messy world and love it with all our heart.

And so I invite us to get our hearts in sync this day with Jesus' divine heartbeat. Let us come - humbly and honestly – ready to pray for a new day and new heart. For this is a day of new begging's – a day to let our hearts be renewed as we get in step with Jesus who calls our name and writes on and fills our hearts to overflowing with love and grace – hope and peace. Amen.