

“Get yourself a new heart.” Sermon: 9.28.08 Fr. Hugh
Pentecost 20A. Proper 21. Ezekiel 18: 1-4, 25-32. St. George
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A man’s conscience was really eating away at him.

He finally felt so bad he just had to go and talk to the priest and
confess what was bothering him.

He said: “Father, I’ve been stealing.”

“What did you steal?”

“I stole some lumber from the yard where I work.”

“I see.” said the priest. “Tell me more.”

“Well. A couple of years ago I stole enough lumber to build our
house. Then last year I stole the lumber for my son’s house;
and this year I stole the lumber to build my daughter’s house.”

“Hmm,” the priest said. “That’s really very serious.

I’m going to have to think hard about a penance for you.

So. Have you ever done a retreat?”

“No. Father, I haven’t. But if you can get me the plans,

I can get you the lumber!”

In today's reading from the Old Testament, God gave a message through the prophet Ezekiel - a clear call to straighten up:

“Cast away from you all your transgressions
which you have committed against me;
and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit.”

But what is a new heart? Is it something you really can have, or is it something like innocence, that was lost a long time ago and is completely irretrievable?

Is a new heart even something we really want?

Or is it, again like innocence, something that sounds too much like Pollyanna? Isn't it rather naive?

To imagine that we might be able trade in our old hearts for new hearts might seem a bit deluded of us.

But God does tells us that human wisdom is foolishness to God, while God's ways can seem like foolishness to people.

Is it even possible for us to have a new heart and a new spirit?
The more life goes on, and the more we experience, the more we reluctantly come to accept dishonesty and pain as facts of life.

The media conspires to expose us to ever increasing scenes of violence.

We hear about, read about and see pictures of atrocities. We've even been able to watch whole wars take place live on TV.

Even the discerning movie or TV viewer has seen hundreds of scenes of abject violence, portrayed in films, including murder and rape.

Due to this over exposure we cannot avoid becoming desensitized to such horrors.

The way of the world leaves us all rather jaded.

Is it possible then for us to have a new heart, or a new spirit?

We are all aware of so much injustice, desperate poverty, abuse and misery in the world.

Many people feel powerless to do anything about it and just carry on with their lives as best they can.

Some ask, “Where is God in all this?”

But some also hear God returning that question:

“Where are you, and what are you doing about the pain and suffering you see around you?”

Is it any wonder that heart disease and heart attacks are the leading causes of death in this nation?

Of even greater significance is the inner spiritual condition of our hearts.

The suffering that we are exposed to, whether ours or someone else’s, whether physical, emotional or spiritual, whether real or imagined, leaves us jaded.

It also creates a tremendous need within us.

The need for the cleansing and renewal of our hearts.

There are some questions about the spiritual condition of our hearts that only we can answer for ourselves and we need the Holy Spirit to guide us in examining ourselves with rigorous honesty.

Is my heart truly open to receiving love from others;
- and to expressing love to them?

Is my heart truly welcoming to Jesus Christ?

How much is my heart blocked with unforgiveness, resentment or bitterness?

What does it mean to have a new heart?

It means being open to love.

Not a sappy, gushy sentimentality, but a courageous and determined openness to loving the people around you.

Sometimes we are blessed to encounter a wonderful atmosphere of trust, of warmth, safety and understanding with people.

Some people have remarked that they've found that in some of our church ministry groups, for instance Cursillo, or the choir.

Such an atmosphere of trust and intimacy is a beautiful thing. When it occurs we recognize it intuitively and our hearts are warmed by it.

When it occurs, it illustrates what is possible when people are willing to be open to having a clean heart and a right spirit.

It had been ten years since Danny Croce had been released. Now once again he found himself back at Plymouth Correctional Facility.

He passed through the first set of security doors and felt that uneasy foreboding of *déjà vu*, as he waited for the second door to open. It didn't open. He pressed the buzzer.

A voice came over the intercom, "Who are you?"

The question jarred him; and in a moment of panic he wondered "Am I not the man who'd killed John Gilbert? Oh Yes. I am." He broke into a sweat.

In a split second images, faces and events rushed through his mind. - The day he was released.

His wedding day – the birth of his children.

The years working with troubled kids in Boston.

Getting accepted at college and being granted an ex-offenders scholarship. His graduation.

Yes, he remembered who he was then

and he remembered who he was now.

“Who are you?” The voice jolted him out of his thoughts.

He looked up at the security camera and said:

“I’m your new prison chaplain.”

Who says God isn’t in the business of changing hearts?

Having a new heart means being free from resentment or coldness; free from selfishness or greed.

Free from ill-feeling or prejudice.

As Christians we are expected to be diligent in examining our lives. An interesting perspective for examining your life is to reflect on how you would hope to be remembered.

If you were assigned the task of personally writing your own eulogy, what would you have to say about how much you were able to fulfill God's call to love?

Consider how you hope those you'll leave behind will remember you. For most of us it is would probably not be how much money we had; nor the places we've visited; - perhaps not even our great achievements.

Probably how most of us would like to be remembered is as a good person, a kind person, a caring person who thought of other people.

Perhaps others will remember the times when we were especially loving. The times when we were able to show our love with an act of kindness.

If you look back you will see that whatever you most cherish remembering, you can be sure that love was present.

And this is only to be expected, since God created us in His image - and that is loving.

Something Khara and I frequently notice, and it may be the same for you, is that it's not just the tragic events of life that move us to tears, but it is also very much acts of kindness and expressions of genuine caring.

With summer over, at least theoretically, and being now in the season lead up to Christmas, with I'm told, only 87 shopping days left, it could be a good time to take a fresh look at our spiritual condition and our standing with the Lord.

A time to devote more attention to nourishing our souls rather than our wants.

God does not want token gestures from us.

But He will respond when we bring our troubled spirits and contrite hearts to Him.

God is deeply concerned with our heartfelt desire to abandon whatever is jaded, bitter and cold, and to embrace what is fresh, hopeful and loving.

All the commandments of God can be understood in this context of removing obstacles to love; and creating a new heart.

It is through our choice to be in intimate, honest relationship with Jesus Christ that God speaks directly to our hearts.

It is through repentance and closeness to Christ that our hearts are renewed.

I have a little book I really like. It's one of those special books that I've read over and over again. It's a book about a simple and remarkable philosophy of life developed by a Carmelite monk over three hundred years ago.

The book is entitled "The Practice of the Presence of God."

Lawrence had been a soldier, until he was wounded.

Like every soldier who's been to war he'd seen more horror than anyone should see in lifetime.

Then he worked as a footman, a job at which he said he was absolutely hopeless.

Between his large build, his innate clumsiness and his war injury, he was for ever in trouble for breaking things.

In his midlife he felt moved to devoting himself more fully to God and he decided to join the Carmelite monastery.

Brother Lawrence resolved with that new beginning, that whatever he did for the rest of his life, he would do it for the love of God.

He worked in the kitchen, so he would cook for the love of God.

He washed the pots and pans - for the love of God. When it was time to mop the floors - he would do it for the love of God.

When he took out the garbage - he did it for the love of God.

Everything he did, he approached with this attitude, that no matter how boring or repetitious the task, he would bring to it the love of God.

The first result was that everything he did took on a new degree of pleasure, not normally to be found in mundane chores.

The greater result was that he started to discover a new heart of joy and love for God, and a new ability to get along well with everyone.

Whatever you do – do it for the love of God - and may God bless us all with renewed hearts and renewed spirits.

Amen.