

Preparing Your Heart

One of the traditional themes of Advent is preparing your heart to receive your Savior.

But what does that mean? How do we prepare our hearts?

When we speak of our heart in this context, we're obviously not referring to that red lump of muscle which acts as a pump for our cardiovascular systems.

Instead, we use "the heart" to refer to the place where all of our emotions and desires and longings reside.

We speak of loving someone with all our heart and of giving our heart to the one we love.

Our hearts are the source of what we call romantic love.

But the ancient Israelites didn't think that their emotions and desires and longings sprung from their hearts.

Actually, they thought they came from their intestines.

Pretty romantic, huh?

How about a love song entitled "My intestines Yearn for You."

Or, "Here I Stand with my intestines in my Hand?"

In any case, when the Scriptures do refer to the heart they usually have some unflattering things to say about it.

Back in Noah's time, God observed that *"every inclination of the thoughts of [man's] heart was only evil all the time."*

Solomon said, *"The purposes of a man's heart are deep waters."*

Jeremiah said, *"The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure."*

And Jesus said, *"Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. And these are what make a man unclean."*

So as far as the Bible is concerned, the contents of the human heart are polluted waters.

Once upon a time, of course, our hearts were not befouled.

They were clean and pure and bore the image of God.

In paradise, before Adam and Eve imbibed the knowledge of evil, they had pure hearts.

They longed only for God and for each other and they were able to satisfy each other's longings.

Can you imagine what a blessed state that was?

To not only have all of your own emotions and desires and longings fulfilled, but to be able to fulfill those of the one you loved simply by virtue of being who and what you are?

But Adam and Eve were infected with a craving for something God had warned them not to acquire and after they had acted on that craving, they infected their children and everyone since, and now here we are: people with impure hearts who are dissatisfied with the things God has given us and who crave other things we neither need nor profit by having.

And so the notion which has become very popular in our time that you should follow your heart and trust it to guide you, is a very risky proposition.

In fact, it's a lousy idea.

How many times have you longed for something—or someone—you didn't need and probably knew you shouldn't have?

Popular music has been permeated by the idea of the "heart-led-life" ever since the days of Tin Pan Alley.

"How can it be wrong when it feels so right?" the song asks.

And the answer is; "Easily!"

Yearning for something God hasn't given us is the essence of lust.

Lust is not only illicit sexual desire; it is any craving we cherish for anything that God has not seen fit to give us.

People lust for all kinds of things.

We lust for jobs we couldn't do if we had them, for homes twice the size of what we need, for new faces and bodies we don't need.

We crave things we assume God hasn't been WISE enough to give us.

Who are we kidding?

How long do you think any of those things would make you happy?

How long have any of them have kept you happy in the past?

If you're not happy right now, do you really think it's because you don't have enough things?

I don't think so.

No, the heart is deceitful above all things AND BEYOND CURE.

We need more than a pacemaker.

We need more than a bypass.

We need new hearts.

How do we get them?

According to David, who was a man after the Lord's own heart, they need to be created in us by God Himself.

"Create in me a new heart, O God," he wrote in the 51st Psalm.

And God is willing to create new hearts in us, but he will do so on only one condition, and that is that he come and live at the worksite where the work is to be done and do it Himself in the person of the Holy Spirit.

But in order for the Holy Spirit to do this creative work in us, **we have to prepare the way.**

And so John the Baptizer cries out: *"Prepare ye the way of the Lord!"* and Isaiah cries out, *"Build up the highway and remove the stones!"*

Make way for the Lord so that He may enter through the portals of your heart and make you a holy people, redeemed of the Lord.

And that brings us back to the question we started with: How do we prepare our deceitful and corrupt hearts to receive our Savior?

The answer does not lie in correcting or repairing the one we have, but in acquiring a new one that has been created by God.

But before we can acquire a new heart, we first need to get rid of the one we have.

And the way we do that, my friends, is through **repentance**—the earnest longing for a new heart that comes from an honest examination of the contents of the heart we have.

But, you say, I've done that! I've made a list of my sins and asked God to forgive me and He does but the sins still don't go away.

I don't feel any different than I did before I made the list! What's the matter?

Well, the problem is that you and I, with the help of an increasingly decadent society, have developed a remarkable ability to tolerate our sins.

You could even say that we forgive ourselves for our sins.

We're so good at it that we can forgive our sins even before we've committed them!

We can wallow in lust or hatred or anger or envy for one minute and forget about it the next and never feel much guilt because we've gotten used to our sins and we like to think that God has too.

But if we feel no remorse, how can we repent?

And if we don't repent, how can we receive a new heart?

And if we don't receive a new heart, aren't we still stuck with the one we have?

Such are the thoughts that trouble sincere Christians who struggle every day to work out their salvation with fear and trembling.

Would you like to know an ironclad, surefire way to repent from the bottom of your soul and receive a new heart?

That's easy.

Go to confession.

Tell your sins to a confessor.

This is one area in which the Roman Catholic Church has been right all along and the Lutheran church has been wrong.

The Church of Rome has always offered the opportunity of private confession to a priest.

Not a generic confession like the one we make every Sunday, when we say, *“Forgive me Lord for all my sins of thought, word and deed.”*

But a confession of actual sins to a confessor who is bound by his vows of ordination to forgive them and never divulge them to another living soul.

Catholic priests and Lutheran pastors are both bound to honor the sanctity of confession.

When you take your sins to a pastor or priest you leave them there.

As Jesus left the sins of mankind in the tomb when he rose from the dead, so does the one who confesses his sins leave them behind and go forth in new life.

It doesn't require any preparation.

You just sit down and tell your confessor the sinful things you have thought, the sinful words you have spoken, and the sinful things you have thought and said and done.

The pornography you turned to in a moment of weakness.

The petty jealousy you feel for someone.

The gossip you indulged in.

The hurtful things you said to your spouse.

The lie you told your employer when you called in sick and then went shopping.

Confess these concrete sins out loud and you will receive forgiveness in Jesus' name.

Do that and you will repent.

You will feel ashamed and humiliated and you will earnestly desire never to return to those sins again.

Your pride will be deflated and that's the best thing that can happen to you, because it is with your pride—your desperate need to retain the good opinion of other people—that you bind your sins.

If the thought of doing this is appalling to you; if you are horrified at the thought of revealing your sinful thoughts and words and actions to another person, then you

are perhaps for the very first time looking upon your sins as God looks upon them.

They ARE appalling. They are revolting.

And you can thank God for the revulsion you feel, because that revulsion comes from the death-throes of your current heart, and prepares the way for you to receive a new heart.

But what grieves God more than the sins themselves, which God is always willing to forgive, is pride which keeps you from confessing them.

God strikes down the proud, but He loves a humble and contrite heart. *“He has scattered the proud in their inmost thoughts...but has lifted up the humble.”*

A heart emptied of its sins through pride-killing confession is a heart prepared to receive its Savior.

Later in his life, Martin Luther came to view confession as almost a third sacrament, along with Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. That’s how important he thought it was.

Awhile back, a member of the church I used to serve who had moved away called me to tell me that she and her husband had managed to put their marriage back together after it had seemed to be irretrievably lost.

“In looking back on it,” she said, “the one who was mostly wrong was me.”

I don’t know if that was factually correct or not, but it was a spiritually healthy way for her to think.

After she stopped blaming her husband for everything and confessed her own sin, she felt like a hundred pound weight had been lifted from her back. *“Why is it so hard for us to admit that we’re wrong?”* she said.

Why indeed?

God has given you a way to get rid of your old heart and receive a new one: only your pride stands in the way.

Why don’t you use this Advent season to take an honest look at what’s wrong in your heart, confess it and begin to receive the new heart God wants to give you?

It would be the best Christmas gift you could ever give yourself.

Amen.

