

*Ready for a Change: A Heart for God*

Psalm 51, Jeremiah 31:31-34

Whitefish UMC

March 29, 2009

- † The distinctive chime signaled a text message from our beloved niece Anya. Usually cheerful, this message conveyed gloom and regret. Her varsity soccer team had just been defeated by a bitter rival, and she didn't even get to play. On top of that, report cards had just been issued, and Anya was wrestling with the guilt from a bad grade in geometry.
- † How interesting that it's report card time as we near the end of our Lenten journey. It's hard to believe that the time has passed so quickly. We've entered this sanctuary for five Sundays now, and each Sunday we've been greeted by this striking purple banner with the words from today's Psalm calling us:
- † *Create in me a clean heart...* Now that Lent is drawing to a close, how would your Lenten report card read? The preacher Fleming Rutledge writes: "I have flunked Lent. I flunk it every year."
- † Come to think of it, that would be the grade I'd give myself, too. And I began with such good intentions! On Ash Wednesday, when we gathered here and prayed Psalm 51 together, asking for mercy and cleansing, for wisdom, for an erasing of the record that stands against us—I had such high hopes that this year it would be different.
- † If only I could try harder, be more loving, forgive more easily—that clean heart might become a reality instead of just wishful thinking. But therein lies the problem. It seems that, once again, I have treated

Lent as a time for self-improvement, self-help, even—so I could become nicer, smarter, better.

- † How easily I have substituted my own will for God's transforming love—and the result is predictable—a failing grade. But here's where we need the reminder from Jeremiah's news flash to the struggling and faltering people—we are still God's beloved, and we are forgiven.
- † Fleming Rutledge relates this story: During the Persian Gulf War, one of the *New Yorker* writers was reminded of an incident described by George Orwell during the Spanish Civil War. Orwell wrote from the front lines that he saw a man from the opposing, Fascist forces jump out of the trench and run along the parapet in full view, presumably carrying a message to an officer. He had nothing on but a pair of ill-fitting trousers, which he held up with one hand as he ran. Orwell wrote, 'I refrained from shooting him . . . I had come here to shoot at "fascists," but a man who is holding up his trousers isn't a "fascist," he is visibly a fellow-creature, similar to yourself and you don't feel like shooting him.'

"When God looks at us," Rutledge goes on to say, "he does not see titles, bank accounts, club memberships, vacation homes, net worth. He sees frail, vulnerable creatures trying to cover up our spiritual nakedness. When Jesus came down from heaven to live among us,

he lived among us at that level. The Son of God gave up all his divine prerogatives and came into the world to be a fellow-creature with us in our deepest need. We were God's enemies, deserving of death; but he looked on us trying to hold up our trousers with one hand and declared that we were not enemies but friends."

- † Last week we considered the question: "Why would God love such a broken world, and what are we meant to do with that love?" The heart of God is so much greater than anything we can wrap our frail minds around, that it is hard to relate to it.
- † But what if loving God with a clean and creative heart were meant to be not a goal for which to strive, but an effortless joy? And how in heaven's name can that joy be ours?
- † A couple of weeks ago, when I was in Helena, an old friend who once had been Governor Stephens' natural resource policy advisor, and a newspaper editor, asked me why there were so many Ten Commandments billboards in the Flathead.
- † I replied that it was somehow about critical mass—once some businesses and churches started putting up the billboards, others thought they needed to follow suit.
- † But we can also attribute the disproportionate number of Ten Commandments billboards to a man with a sense of divine mission, who tirelessly visits organizations urging them to join the movement. I confess that I don't remember his name, but I've visited with him several times.

- † Each time we meet, we have a friendly, spirited conversation about the effect of many Ten Commandments billboards in our valley. He believes that our valley will be transformed if only each “Christian” business and organization displays the Ten Commandments.
- † And I counter that what would really transform the valley would be a living out of Jesus’ Great Commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself.”
- † These were the commandments that John Wesley consistently put first in his ministry, so I rest on my heritage and hold fast to a transformed heart instead of a billboard.
- † When engaging in this friendly argument, I usually quote today’s passage from Jeremiah 31 to bolster my position. But though I still think I’m correct (of course!), there seems to be an almost fatal flaw to my stand.
- † The problem is that it is so difficult to love God, ourselves, and our neighbors wholeheartedly. We know this. There are in this world too many other loves competing for our heart’s desire. I love my family. I love chocolate. I love pie. I love books. I love to travel. I love my dog Snappy and my horse Whitey. I’d love not to worry about money. I’d love to be thinner. I’d love to not worry or get discouraged. I love comfort.
- † I’d love and I’d love and I’d love...and before too long loving God with all your heart and with all your soul becomes nothing more than a token of appreciation, a visit to church once in awhile, or a tax deduction at the end of the year.

- † And the prophets warned us against this putting love of God at the end of the list instead of first. The Lord, they said, doesn't want your measly offerings of attention. What does the Lord require of you? "But to do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8)
- † But despite our failure to get it right, our biblical history is replete with God's response of forgiving love. So why is it so hard for us to embrace that gift and let the joy of it be carved on our hearts?
- † Heaven knows there are enough heart-breaking events in our lives. Each of them carves a little bit of our heart, leaving scars that threaten to build up so much that our heart can't function well anymore.
- † In her two parallel books about a small town in Iowa, Marilynne Robinson tells the story of two ministers in the 1950's who are aged and near death. The first book, *Gilead*, describes the consoling reflections of Rev. Ames, who gently eases into death, despite his sadness at leaving his young son and wife.
- † Her more recent book is called *Home* and describes the homecoming of Rev. Boughton's prodigal son Jack. Jack and his dying minister father know that they ought to forgive one another, but they continue to rasp against each other's sensibilities time and time again.
- † In *Gilead* Rev. Ames tried to explain to Jack that 'sozo' the Greek origin of the English Bible's "saved" can also mean "healed, restored—as in salved." But although Jack if offered grace in many forms, he can't or won't accept it for his own.
- † At the end of *Home*, Jack's sister Glory thinks of Jack in the terms of the famous description of the Messiah as a "man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, and as one from whom men hide their face."

*Home* is a book about sorrow, disappointment, and our failure to accept the love and grace we are offered if we will only make room for it.

- † Near the end of *Gilead*, Rev. Ames observes “Augustine says the Lord loves each of us as an only child, and that has to be true. ‘He will wipe the tears from all faces.’ It takes nothing away from the loveliness of the verse to say that is exactly what will be required.”
- † Sadly, our human condition, our failure to accept the joyful gift of a heart for God, means we will be forever looking to God for consolation and comfort in spite of ourselves.
- † And so we come full circle, back to the psalm with which we began our Lenten journey: Create in me a clean heart, and renew a right spirit within me.
- † If we ask God to make room in our hearts for the only necessary thing—a desire for God—I KNOW that the rest will follow. For God IS love, and so love of family, of neighbor, of earth, of beauty will follow.
- † Our niece Anya texted me again today. “I’m so glad it’s the beginning of a new quarter. I have a new start, and I’m going to work hard for an A in geometry and hope I get a B.”
- † Thank God our Lenten report card isn’t written in stone on God’s heart. It’s a new day, and God’s forgiving love is stronger than our scarred hearts.
- † May we simply make room in our hearts for the desire for God, and let God’s creative writing complete a story of love and justice in us.
- † Amen.

Sources:

Debra Jean Murphy, “Flunking Lent” <http://ekklesiaproject.blogspot.com>

Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*. 2001

Marilynne Robinson, *Home*. 2008