



Anglican Parish of St. Peter's Church,

Hackett's Cove, Nova Scotia

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Sixth Sunday after The Epiphany: Mending Our Hearts

16 February 2020

Happy are they whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord!

Happy are they who observe his decrees and seek him with all their hearts!

I

Perhaps, some of you celebrated Valentine's Day last Friday. Our *Book of Common Prayer* commemorates the Feast of St. Valentine. During Bible study, last Wednesday evening, we learned there may have been as many as **three** St. Valentines, who were all martyrs for Christ! They all stood up in one form or another for Christ's love. Imagine expecting one Valentine – and getting three! Did this happen to anyone here?

Last week, the stores were filled with tokens we could buy for loved ones: red candies, balloons, flowers chocolates, humorous cards, and diamonds. Our stores were filled to the brim. Well, they are 50 to 75 percent off this week—practically discards, no longer of much value! (Well, maybe not the diamonds....)

Just like at Christmas, the subtle marketing before the big day suggests that if we buy the right thing, our relationships with one another will be made good, perhaps beyond our wildest dreams! The bigger the diamond, the more love you'll get in return – right? Well, we know it doesn't always work that way!

But think of a lovingly hand-crafted card a child gives with all their heart – that is giving. You can't buy love and respect.

And as we know, marketing is often deceptive. So, it isn't bad to buy a present for Valentine's Day, but it is more important to treat your loved one well and have a good heart for that person.

II

So, I admit I struggled with our Gospel reading this week. I wondered how I was going to preach on a Gospel that seems mainly about the sins of Murder, Adultery and Bearing False Witness. (And the bit about Divorce has not been without controversy over the years.) And tying in adultery with St Valentine's Day? Let's not **even** go there....

But, after much reflection, I think Jesus is taking us back to the Ten Commandments, which – however much we might all occasionally stray away from them – are still not a bad code for living our lives. When Christ tells us that the Old Law still applies, this is what he means.

I think Jesus is asking, “how is your heart? What is going on with it?” That’s where it all begins. When we open our hearts to a relationship with God, we allow that grace to pour in and saturate our lives, and at the same time we invite God to search us and know us and heal us. It is about what is in our hearts. So back to that enduring symbol of Saint Valentine – the heart.

If you search in the Book of Common Prayer service of Holy Communion, you will find at least 14 references to the word “heart” – and almost as many in the BAS! So the state of our hearts is clearly important, before we approach this altar! During Evening Prayer on Wednesday, we confessed that we had “...followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts.” Soon, I will ask you in the Eucharist Prayer to “Lift up your hearts” So are your hearts prepared to be lifted up for Christ today?

In our confession before Holy Communion, we will confess that “We have sinned against you in thought, word and deed.” I think this is the focus of the Gospel today. Jesus seems quite exaggerated in our gospel readings when he refers to the ancient laws. But he was not preaching to a congregation of murderers. So he turns the narrative onto something perhaps more common – anger. If we are angry with our fellow person, Christ tells us that we should be reconciled with them before we come to Him.

How many of us have held onto anger? One of the questions I asked during our Bible study session this week was, “If looks could kill, how many people would you have killed by now?” And, we all admitted – quite a few. Is this how we want to live in Christ?

The same with adultery. Jesus wants us to realize what betrayal and disloyalty can do to our souls. He isn’t actually suggesting that we cut off our limbs, so much as we should cut off that part of our soul that is sinful, so the rest may live. Let’s face it, it is **not** our right hands that cause us to sin – it is what we decide to do with them, against God and against our fellow humans. If we continue to do things that are harmful to our spiritual well-being, it is our souls that will suffer. And it will be our own doing. And, while Christ talks about Hell, and perhaps we all think of mediaeval images of eternal torment – our souls can also suffer in the here and now, from “what we have done” and “what we have left undone”.

III

The winter is moving on quickly. Soon Lent will be here, with Ash Wednesday and the imposition of ashes. “Dust we are, and unto dust we shall return.” We will be asked to turn from our wickedness, and live. So what do we do?

Some of us may “give up” something for Lent – and sometimes it will be something that is difficult to give up. Or perhaps we will choose the easy thing, just to say that we did it. And some of us will do nothing at all.

If we give up anything, let it be something that interferes with our relationships with others, or – even worse – with our Saviour. It could be a habit, or a substance, or a luxury – but if we don’t

miss it by Easter Sunday, perhaps we have learned that we can live without it. If it is a luxury, we will likely appreciate it more and be thankful to God.

Soon, we will journey with Christ to Jerusalem towards the cross. He gave up his entire body for our sins. Now that's giving up something for Lent! What will we give up for him? Let's start with our hearts. That's what love demands.

IV

A pivotal point of the gospel reading today is when Jesus said, "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift."

We are commanded to repent every week, before approaching the altar. God knows, it isn't easy, but we are called to do our best. And repentance requires that we make things right. As C.S. Lewis' Demon says in *The Screwtape Letters*, "As long as (a man) doesn't convert it into action, it does not matter how much (he) **thinks** about his repentance." It is often said that actions speak louder than words. It is all about how we treat each other, not what we say to ourselves.

Jesus is saying that when we have done something to upset or hurt another person we should go to them and say, "I'm sorry" as soon as we can. Think of your apology as a way to bring you and the person you have harmed together and as a way to mend the hurt. It is more important to be reconciled with your loved ones than to offer a gift.

So in a few minutes, when we exchange The Peace, let us make a point of reaching out to anyone we perhaps don't feel "in love and charity" with. And if you really **do** feel in love and charity with everyone, don't worry. You are truly blessed, and maybe some if it will rub off!

V

As some of you might have guessed, I was recently re-reading C.S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters*. The book takes the form of a series of letters, exchanged between Wormwood, a junior devil, and his uncle Screwtape, on how Wormwood can cause the human to which he has been assigned, who is referred to as "the patient", to commit sins, and damn himself. It is a fascinating read.

So Jesus is trying show us how angry, lustful and selfish thoughts and lies can be the "slippery slope" to losing touch with God. C.S. Lewis' demon, Screwtape, says: "The safest road to hell is the gradual one - the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts."

As Deuteronomy tells us, "if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess."

And so back to Valentine's Day. This is the God who loves us and only asks, like a shy suitor, for our love in return. We are blessed to be loved by the One whose throne is heaven, and whose

footstool is the earth. What better Valentine could we ask for? This is the God who, in Jesus, wants to know, “How is your heart?” and promises to help and heal us, no matter what. This is the God whose grace heals our hearts, and provides the answers to our deepest questions.

Let us love, honour and respect God and our fellow humans, and perhaps, by God’s grace, we may come back to “live in the land that the Lord swore to give to our ancestors.”

Amen.