

## "A Change of Heart"

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Text: Psalm 51:10-17; Jeremiah 31:31-34

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Well Tuesday's the big day. Do you have valentines to send? Husbands, wives – do you have something special for your spouse? I heard statistics that well over \$3 billion is spent on Valentine's Day stuff. On Valentine's Day, we'll see all kinds of hearts – paper hearts, candy hearts – hearts will be everywhere. The imagery of the heart is with us not just on February 14, but all the time. Think of some of the songs we hear that refer to the heart: "I Cross My Heart," "Owner of a Lonely Heart," "Hungry Heart," "Heart of Stone," "Acky Breaky Heart," "I Left My Heart in San Francisco," "Near to the Heart of God," "Don't Go Breaking My Heart," "Deep in the Heart of Texas," "Straight from the Heart," "If I Only Had a Heart," "My Heart Will Go On," and one of my favorites, "When Your Heart Goes Woo, Woo, Woo."

The image of the heart is also part of our language: "Absence makes the heart grow fonder," "A way to a man's heart is through his stomach," "Bless your heart."

Do you ever think about your heart other than in the physical sense? In Bible psychology, the heart was the central and unifying organ of personal life. Ancient Hebrews did not make a sharp distinction between physical and psychic powers and tended to attribute psychological functions to certain organs of the body. Of all such organs, the heart was the chief; it was the innermost spring of individual life, the ultimate source of all its physical, intellectual, emotional, and volitional energies, and consequently, the part of a human through which he or she achieved contact with God. In the recesses of the heart dwelt the thoughts, plans, attitudes, fears, and hopes which determined the character of an individual; here also God could work in secret to transform that character by implanting new thoughts and feelings.

In today's scriptures we have the Psalmist asking for cleansing and pardon, praying, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right Spirit with me." And we also have the promise of God, spoken through the prophet Jeremiah, a promise of a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. God declares, "I will put my law within them and I will write it upon their hearts. I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more."

Did you happen to take notes the week of the death of Norman Shumway, the cardiac surgeon who performed the first successful heart transplant in the United States in 1968? I don't have a heart problem, but I can imagine myself in the operating room of a major hospital for spiritual surgery scheduled for a heart transplant. A team of surgeons – led by someone like Dr. Shumway – capped, masked, gloved, and gowned loom over me. The surgery begins, and as the scalpel cuts through the layers of tissue beneath which is buried that life-pumping organ, I wonder what they'll say when my heart is revealed for what it is. Will it be, "Oh my, the heart cavity is so congested with fear that the heart has shrunk and can barely pump?" Or, "The heart's just numb. No matter how we shock it or stimulate it, it just doesn't respond?" Or, "This heart has hardened – it's covered with scar tissue." Or will it be that the prayer I've prayed so often – the Psalmist's prayer, "Create in me a clean heart," will have been answered? That I won't need a transplant after all?

But the huddle of surgeons calls a time out, and sends an assistant to get my medical records – including a full health history – baptism and ordination certificates, datebooks, cancelled checks, family affidavits, testimony from my enemies, the whole story. Before proceeding, they want a complete heart history. I hope the assistant gets somebody else's chart by mistake. Maybe he'll grab Dr. Wally Carpenter's chart. Dr. Carpenter is the man who established the health clinic in Falmouth, Jamaica, where we go on our mission trip. Now there's a man who has a compassionate heart. Maybe the surgeons will think I have a heart like his. Or if I'm lucky, the doctors will mistake my heart for someone like Katie Wandel, a Kansas City, Kansas philanthropist and art teacher featured in today's *Kansas City Star*. She works with kids in the inner city. "I fell in love with those kids in the urban core. I am helping them find their creativity and I was getting them out into the world to see what's out there beyond their own neighborhoods."

You see, as I lie on the surgeon's table waiting for some word or decision, I am aware only of all my life's evidence of a lawless and cold heart. I think back to when we lived in Kansas City, and Ben was in kindergarten. He attended a magnet school in the southeast part of Kansas City – thirty minutes from our home. We'd go to the school programs in the evening and I remember feeling quite proud that we were sending our son to a school where most of the students were minority students – feeling really pleased that we were teaching our son something important about racial diversity and fighting prejudice, but then leaving the building after the program was over, praying that we

would not get a flat tire in “that part of town.” I remember being involved in racial harmony projects in Kansas City, during a given week, but then standing silent, saying nothing when an elder from the congregation I was serving stood in back of the sanctuary after worship and told me a joke using the “N” word.

I think of those occasions in which someone in my presence said something mean or hateful to someone else. And I did or said nothing. I remember those times when I said something mean or hateful to someone else. Those times when my eyes were so swollen with pride that I could not see the needs of those around me. Times when I knew what I was about to do was the wrong thing to do and I knew that God wouldn’t want me doing it, but I did it anyway.

Lying on the operating table, I’d remember all those board meetings of Big Brothers/Big Sisters I attended in McPherson, while never offering to be a big brother to a boy who needed one. I’d think of the sickening statistic that 40,000 children die every day from hunger and illnesses related to malnutrition, and was I doing anything about it, or the fact that our sheepdog eats better than millions of people. I think of those occasions in which my heart was hardened – when it was cold and unfeeling – when it lacked tenderness or depth of feeling; when I was a terrible example of a follower of Jesus Christ. I don’t know about you, but I have a lot of ground to cover when I think about my lawless heart. Is God’s law really and truly written there?

Well, after what seems like a very long time, the assistant returns; his hands are empty. It seems they’ve lost my records. What was it Jeremiah tells us God said, “I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more”? The chief surgeon huddles over me, and points. Look, it’s a new heart, it’s brand new! Could it be that my prayer, “Create in me a clean heart, O God,” had finally been answered after I’d prayed it so long and so often I’d begun to wonder if I really meant it any more or was I just in the habit? Could it be that when I’d finally admitted that my heart just wasn’t in it – wasn’t in life and faith and compassion and needed drastic, do-or-die measures – that it mysteriously was already “put in it”? The surgeon says, “Look, everybody, it’s a new heart; it’s brand new! It’s signed ‘God’ – and in parenthesis are the letters JC and HS. I can’t explain it but there it is. He doesn’t need a heart transplant – sew him back up.”

I don’t need a heart transplant – neither do you. God through Jesus Christ can give us new hearts – a change of heart. A change of heart doesn’t require an operation or a hospital stay. God only asks for an expression of repentance and a decision to allow Jesus Christ to be Lord of one’s life. During our trip to Jamaica, our mission team had the privilege of being part of a change of heart in a man’s life. Following a river raft excursion, one of the employees of the rafting outfit – a bartender – visited with one of the other pastors about his desire for a new start, a new direction, a changed heart. He decided to make that declaration of faith and was baptized by that pastor at the water’s edge.

God can give all of us a renewed heart – even right now. Take a moment, close your eyes, hear these words of the Psalmist.

Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy  
blot out my transgressions.

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions,  
and my sin is ever before me.  
Against you, you alone, have I sinned,  
and done what is evil in your sight,  
so that you are justified in your sentence  
and blameless when you pass judgment. . . .

You desire truth in the inward being;  
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. . . .

Hide your face from my sins,  
and blot out all my iniquities.

Create in me a clean heart, O God,

and put a new and right spirit within me.