

The 2nd Sunday in Lent: Holy Trinity Church: March 12, 2017

John 3: 1-17: *I Will Remove Your Heart of Stone And Give you a Heart of Flesh*

Preached

By

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

And God said unto the people of Israel, *“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you. I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. You shall be my people and I shall be your God. Ezekiel 36:26.*

Do you remember when the first heart transplant took place? I was in the 7th grade and I remember being absolutely amazed. The first transplant was performed in 1967 in Cape Town, South Africa by Dr. Christiaan Barnard. The recipient was Louis Washkansky, a fifty three year old grocer with a debilitating heart condition. Unfortunately Mr. Washkansky survived only 18 days after surgery. The first successful transplant was performed on Dr. Barnard’s third patient, a dentist named Dr. Philip Blaiberg. He survived for nearly two years. After his surgery, Dr. Barnard carried Dr. Blaiberg’s old

heart to his hospital room in a plastic box and showed it to him. The two men sat on the bed examining the scarring and thickening walls of the dead useless heart. Dr. Barnard said, “Dr. Blaiberg, do you realize you are the first man in the history of humankind to sit and look at your own dead heart?” What an amazing story! Of course, thanks to modern anti-rejection medications, people are living much longer after heart transplants than in those early days.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, during this 2nd week in Lent, I want to talk about hearts of stone, hearts of flesh and new beginnings. We are thankful for physicians like Dr. Barnard, but we are even more thankful that we worship a God who is the only surgeon who can put an entirely new heart into an individual. It is when God removes a heart of stone, a heart filled with anger, hatred, envy, guilt, shame and a host of other negative, destructive emotions and replaces it with a heart of flesh filled with love, joy, peace and wholeness. Do you need that kind of heart transplant? Do you need to make a new beginning in your life?

Here is the good news for the Second Sunday in Lent. The Christian faith, at its very heart, is about new beginnings. In our lesson from the book of Genesis, the first book in our Bible, God said to a man named Abram, “*Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I*

will show you. And I will make of you a great nation.” Abram was an old man at the time. He had no children. Now he would have no homeland; yet God was promising him that he would be the father of a great nation.

St. Paul tells us in the fourth chapter of Romans that Abram “hoped against hope” that the promises of God were true. And they were. Our God is a God of new beginnings. The very word “faith” carries the connotation of hoping against hope, of a believing and daring, of risk and hoping, of never giving up or caving in. The Gospel word is always a word of hope. God never forsakes God’s own. Even in our most dire circumstances there is hope and with hope there is always the possibility of a new beginning, a new life. You know, some people meet tragedy and fall apart at the seams. Others meet the same adversities and see their troubles as a challenge to their faith and courage. They make their troubles work for them, and the harder they fall, the higher they bounce.

My dear sisters and brothers in Christ, the test of our faith is not how we act, but how we react to every situation in life. In this life, we are always in situations which require us to make new beginnings. Fortunately, our God is a god of new beginnings, for a marriage, for a relationship, for a failed life and a hurting heart. However, there is a second thing that needs to be said:

Christian faith not only makes new beginnings possible, it makes new beginnings necessary. In our lesson from John's Gospel Jesus encounters Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews. Nicodemus is not only a good man and a powerful man, but evidently he is a man who is open to the teachings of Jesus. "Rabbi," says Nicodemus, "we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him." I think that is high flattery from one who is a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews. And yet it does not faze Jesus at all. Jesus says to Nicodemus, "*Very truly I tell you, no one can see the Kingdom of God unless they are born again.*" The imagery is puzzling to Nicodemus. How can an old man like himself re-enter his mother's womb and be born again. He is puzzled, but he is also probably a little angry. After all, he is a man of nobility. What kind of new beginning could he possibly need to make? You've known people like that, haven't you? They are the center of their own universe. How dare anyone suggest that they need to change?

Several hundred years ago, before Copernicus, most people believed that the sun and the stars revolved around the earth. When Copernicus issued his revolutionary teachings that the earth was not the center of the universe, he was greeted with a great outcry. It was many years before his teachings were accepted. I think it is very easy to see why people believed that the earth is the

center of the universe. The truth of the matter is that for most people, they themselves are the center of their universe. We come into the world kicking and screaming and insisting that the world meet our needs. Living with my two and a half year old grandson Mitchell, I see that every day. What Nicodemus needed, and what every person in this world needs at some time in his or her life is a radical reorientation in which we acknowledge that we are not the center of the universe.

My brothers and sisters, it is not some particular sin here that is the problem. It is our entire frame of reference. Life can harden our hearts, but God can remove the anger, the prejudices, the bias, the addictions and replace it with a heart of flesh? Are we centered upon ourselves, or are we centered in God and God's will for our lives?

In one of his science fiction books, C.S. Lewis puts it in a memorable way. In this particular fantasy, a space fantasy, he has a scientist from earth land on another planet where he makes friends with the inhabitants. He decides to tell them the history of planet earth. As so he does, he notes with some embarrassment that he is recounting the story of war after war. One of the creatures to whom he is telling this story concludes that their constant fighting must mean that on earth there is no God. Another of the creatures offers

another explanation. Earthlings behave like that, he concludes, not because there is no God, but because each of them wants to be a little God unto himself or herself. Lewis, as usual, hit the nail right on the head. If we are not centered in God, we will be centered in ourselves and in our passions, and our desires and all the many false Gods we like to worship. That is a heart of stone. The Christian faith is all about new beginnings. New beginnings are possible. Even more important, new beginnings are necessary. So, how does God remove our stony hearts? It begins by getting quiet and then humbly praying, “speak God, for your servant is listening.” God will take it from there.

My brothers and sisters, when we meet Christ, new beginnings are inevitable. When we truly meet Jesus, we cannot help but become a new creation because our hearts of stone will be removed and a new heart, a heart of the flesh will be given you. That is what worship is all about. We come to our Holy Trinity Church as a family to hear the Word of God read, broken open and preached, to sing the great hymns of faith, to confess our sins, to make our intercessory prayers, to offer our praise and thanksgiving, to exchange Christ’s peace with one another and to receive the body and blood of God’s Son, Jesus the Christ in Holy Communion. Each week, we come to our Holy Trinity Church so that we might have an encounter with the living God at this time and in this holy

place and we are challenged to make a new beginning. So, every time you come into this church be prepared for an encounter with God. If our hearts are prepared, a new beginning is inevitable. Every Sunday is an opportunity for a new beginning. It can happen at any time. It is not only possible. It is not only necessary. It is inevitable.

I want to tell you a story about a man named Bill Moore who discovered what a new beginning was all about. Bill grew up in poverty. One night he got drunk and shot and killed a man over a five thousand dollar debt. He ended up on death row. Two men visited the prison where Bill Moore was incarcerated and told him about Jesus and his love, a love that sent Jesus to death row for people just like Bill. Nobody had ever told Bill about Jesus before. He'd been sitting on death row for years. He turned his life over to Jesus, and it changed him so much that God changed his stone cold hardened heart of darkness, bitterness and hatred to a heart of flesh, so much so, that other people began to be drawn to him. People started meeting Jesus through this guy on death row. He became known as 'The Peacemaker.' His cell block was the safest place in the penitentiary because so many people were coming to Christ through Bill Moore. Local churches found out about this, and when people needed counseling, churches began to send their parishioners to the penitentiary to get counseling from Bill Moore. Can you imagine coming to

Holy Trinity Church for counselling and at the end of our meeting I refer you to a convicted murderer doing life without the possibility of parole over there at the Super Max prison in Cranston?

My brothers and sisters in Christ, what does that to a human being? Jesus does that. Bill Moore was changed so much that he won the love of the family of the man he killed. It changed him so much over the sixteen-year period that all kinds of people wrote letters for him. Eventually, the authorities not only canceled his death sentence; they not only commuted his sentence, which was unprecedented; but they paroled him. Bill Moore now serves as head of a congregation in a couple of housing projects in a desperately poor area.

My sisters and brothers, our challenge this week is to think about Bill Moore's story because that story is all about the life-changing power of Jesus Christ in one person's life. I understand. None of you are on death row. I truly believe that you are good people, wonderful people. I would never send you to the Super Max for counseling. But, could it be that deep down in your heart there is a hunger for something more to life? Is it time for you to make a new beginning? Is it time for you to put down somethings in your life that separate you from God and isn't it time for you to pick up something that will draw

you to God and one another? The choice is all yours, the question is will you accept that new heart today? AMEN