

Matthew 5:21-37 – Your True Love

This past Friday was Valentine’s Day. It’s been hard to look around the last couple of weeks without noticing the hearts everywhere. What started as a day to honor an early Christian martyr has been co-opted by our culture as a day to celebrate love. It is the day of the heart.

But what seems to have happened for many is that this Christian day, co-opted by the world, has been co-opted again. Because for many, Valentine’s Day has become not an expression of love, but a burden, an obligation—something that is expected; something that is required; something they have to do in order to stay in the good graces of their beloved. But if that is the case, then this day is really not a day of the heart at all. It is not a day of love, but of law.

Which is also how the readings of the Word of God that we heard today sounded—full not of love, but of Law. From the lips of Moses we heard: Obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you today. And then from Jesus: You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not swear falsely, and Jesus’ explanation of how to understand those words in all their depth of meaning. And many, when they hear those words, regard them in the same way as Valentine’s Day—that these are things we have to do in order to stay in the good graces of God.

But if you listen to these words a little more closely, you discover that they’re not first and foremost about what you have to do or not do—they’re actually about your heart. Moses is warning the people about their hearts turning away from God, and Jesus is teaching that sin is, in truth, not just what you do or not do, but heart disease. For He reveals that beneath all these sins are problems of the heart—anger, hatred, pride, and lust. Problems that even if you gouged out your eyes and cut off your hands, would remain. To be rid of these sins, you’d have to cut out your heart, which is to die.

So what we need, then, are new hearts, clean hearts. Which is what we sing in Setting Three of our liturgy: *Create in me a clean heart, O God.* Those are words that David spoke after he did all those things that Jesus talked about today—after he lusted after his neighbor’s wife, Bathsheba; after he committed adultery with her; after he murdered his neighbor to cover it up; and after he lied about it by taking the woman to be his wife and pretending that everything was on the up and up. In fact, even more than that—pretending that he was the good guy, taking care of this poor little lamb after her husband had been killed in such an awful way. David had heart disease.

God sent Nathan the prophet to speak His Word to David, to reveal the sin in his heart, which caused David then to pray: *Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.* David needed forgiveness yes, but also a new heart. For only from a new, clean heart, could come right love.

David prayed: *Create in me a clean heart, O God.* That word create is an important one, for whenever God creates, He always does so—to put it in fancy, theological language: *ex nihilo*. From nothing. In the beginning, when God created all things, He did so *ex nihilo*: from nothing. He used no existing matter, but only His Word. He is the sole source of all things.

And so it is with the good that He gives to and works in us. To create a clean heart in us is not to use anything in us, to simply reform or improve our hearts, but to create new and clean hearts in us *ex nihilo*—from nothing already existing within us. By His Word of forgiveness alone He creates in us what was not there before, taking hearts that are by nature sinful and unclean, and creating in us new and clean hearts.

And not only once, as if once were enough and now we’re good. Just as God’s work did not end after He created all things, but He continues to care for His creation, so also He continues to work in us. Which is good, and necessary, for how often do anger and hatred and lust and pride and all sorts of sins erupt in our hearts and make us unclean again! The Christian life, as

Luther said, is a life of constant repentance. Which is to say, a life of constant reliance not on what we do, but on the life-giving forgiveness and cleansing of God. Create in me, O God. It is all from You.

But David not only prayed: Create in me a clean heart, O God—but also: and renew a right spirit within me. For along with the grace and forgiveness of God, we need a new spirit. We need our old, wrong thinking and loving to be renewed—to make them new again, as they were in the beginning, filled with and controlled by not our old, sinful spirit, but the Spirit of God. That we not think that God's love is conditional or earned by what we do, but that we learn to see God and His love rightly.

And to learn that, the Word and Spirit of God point our eyes to the cross. For there is the unconditional love of God for you, in the person and work of Jesus. His love that did not say: clean up your act, get better, and then I'll love you; but who came for us while we were still sinners. Who came for us while we, like David, were still stuck in our sins and acting as if we are the good guys. Who came and offered up His hands and feet and eyes and all His body parts—though they did not sin—for all our body parts that do. That as our substitute in death, He provided life for us in His resurrection from the dead.

That is the life now given to you through the water of Holy Baptism. For in baptism, the Word and Spirit of God join you to Jesus in His death and resurrection so that you die and rise with Him to a new life. That all your sinful body parts be offered up and cut off with His, and you be raised in forgiveness to a new life, with a new heart, a new Spirit, and a new love.

And this new love is not just a love of God our Savior, but a new love for one another. For in truth, these are not two different loves—one for God and one for our neighbor—but one and the same love. For just as the love of God was made manifest for us in the flesh of Jesus and His self-sacrifice for us, so too our love for God is made manifest in our flesh and our self-sacrifice for our neighbor. That just as our outward sins reveal a diseased heart, so now our acts of love reveal a heart created new and right. The commandments are not rules that we have to obey, but now show us how we love one another as Christ has loved us.

In Jesus, a great shift has taken place. The Law still shows us our sin and rightly condemns us like David. But the life of Jesus in fulfilling the Law for us and in suffering its condemnation for us, has provided for us all the blessings of God promised to those who keep the Law. That by faith in Him, we receive not what we deserve, but the forgiveness, life, and salvation that is the gift of our Savior.

So we now pray with David, Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. And as you do today, also rejoice that your prayer is now answered here, in the cleansing and renewing Body and Blood of Jesus in His Supper. To come here is to choose life. For here you are fed, you are strengthened, you are forgiven, you are filled with Christ—the same Jesus who served you on the cross, now serving you here with His Supper and in His Supper. Same Jesus, same forgiveness, same love, same life. On the cross given for you, on the altar given to you. That there be no shortage of love in your heart and life, but you be reconciled with your brothers and sisters, live in chastity and faithfulness, and speak with honesty and truth. That your Savior's life be your life. That your Savior's love be your love.

And that is the heart and love you now have in Christ. The heart and love of your heavenly Bridegroom poured out for you, His Bride. The heart and love that enabled Valentine to lay down his life, and you too. For friends and enemies. For those who love you back and those who don't. The heart and love of Jesus—given for you, given to you, and now given by you.