

**"The Kind of Heart God Wants Us to Have"**  
**Sermon for Ash Wednesday**  
**Lectionary Year A**  
**March 9, 2011**  
**Texts: Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Psalm 51:1-17;**  
**2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21**  
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All of us are familiar with symbols. The symbol for the Dallas Cowboys is a distinctive silver and blue star, as tarnished as it is these days. The symbol for the Olympics is the interlocking circles. When I was growing up, the symbol for the television network NBC was the peacock. The symbol for the United Methodist Church is the easily recognizable cross and flame. Even children are familiar with symbols. Your kids probably don't have any trouble spotting the golden arches, for example.

A few weeks ago we celebrated Valentine's Day, and there is one predominant symbol for this special day, the heart. When we think of Valentine's Day, we naturally think of hearts. When we were children in elementary school we made valentines for our mothers and our fathers and our boyfriends and girlfriends by cutting out hearts and writing simple "I love you" on them in crayon. Even as we grow older and our expressions of affection become more eloquent, there are almost always hearts associated with our valentines.

Two of our scripture lessons for this evening talk about hearts, particularly *our* hearts with respect to God. The texts in question, the one from the second chapter of Joel and the one from Psalm 51, indicate what God expects of our hearts. God expects our hearts to be given to

him, like our loved ones expect the symbol of a heart to be given to them in some way on Valentine's Day.

One of the things we need to know is what the Old Testament means when it talks about the heart. The Hebrew word for heart is *leb* (pronounced "lave"). For the ancient Hebrews, the *leb* or heart in its abstract meaning became the richest biblical term for the totality of a person's inner nature. It meant more than just emotions. In the Hebrew way of understanding human beings, thought functions were attributed to the heart. Wisdom and understanding were thought to be seated in the heart, and the heart was also seen as the seat of the will. In other words, in the Old Testament, the heart means the personality, every inner disposition that makes me who I am as a person [*Theological Wordbook of the OT*, Vol. I, p. 466].

That is what God expects—all of what makes me who I am. God wants my personality, my selfhood, my character, my identity, my individuality. God wants my *leb*, my heart.

And so we are asked in these two passages of scripture to give our hearts to God. But these two biblical texts go on to say *what kind of heart* God wants us to have and to give to him. On the basis of what these two Old Testament texts teach us, I want to suggest to you this evening that God wants **a complete heart, a contrite heart, and a clean heart**. Let's look one at a time at these three characteristics of the kind of heart God wants us to have.

**God wants us to have a complete heart.** God is not interested in split personalities or divided identities. God is looking for wholeness in us and consistency from us. God does not want us to be two-faced.

Jesus understood this clearly, and so he reserved his harshest criticism for those he called hypocrites. Hypocrites do not have complete hearts. There is an inconsistency with respect to their personalities—one for show and one for real, one for the outside and one for the inside, one for the crowd and one for themselves. The prophet Joel quotes the Lord as saying, "Rend your hearts and not your clothing."

In other words, it's what's on the inside that counts, but there should be a consistent connection between our inner selves and our outer selves.

We are not to be hypocrites. Our devotion to God must be genuine, not artificial or superficial. We can't fake it with God.

God is interested only in a complete heart in the sense that we have given all of ourselves to him alone. According to the passage from Joel, "yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; . . ." The Bible makes it clear that our God is jealous. He's just plain jealous. He isn't interested in sharing us with the other gods of this world—those things we allow to dominate our time, talents, and energies. God wants us to have a complete heart and to give it to him completely. A complete heart is the kind of heart we are to have and give to God.

**God wants us to have a contrite heart**, as well as a complete heart. Contrite is a good word, a biblical word. We don't use it much in everyday speech, though. It means "grieving and penitent for sin or shortcoming." The psalmist says that "the sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."

To have a contrite heart does not mean to be ashamed or guilty or

suffer from low self-esteem. It means to be humble, as opposed to proud or vain or conceited or overly self-confident. More than anything, having a contrite heart means to be honest about who we are and what we have done. It means facing the facts, owning up to the truth. That, I think, is what the psalmist is getting at when he talks about our hearts being broken. A contrite heart reflects a healthy personality or identity, in which a person feels realistically good about himself or herself.

The person with a contrite heart recognizes his limitations and realizes her need for God. The contrite heart knows that we can be reconciled to God not through our own merits, but only through faith in Christ, the one who, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians, God made to be sin who knew no sin, so that *in him* we might become the righteousness of God. The heart that knows this is a contrite heart, and that is the kind of heart God wants us to have.

In addition to having a heart that is complete and contrite, **God wants us to have a clean heart.** What is a clean heart? If by "heart" we mean personality, is a clean heart a perfectly pure personality, one that is altogether free from any unhealthy tendencies? Is a clean heart a selfhood that is completely free from sin? I don't think so. I think the psalmist tells us what a clean heart is. He says

Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
 and put a new and right spirit within me.  
 Do not cast me away from your presence,  
 and do not take your holy spirit from me.  
 Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
 and sustain in me a willing spirit.

I think there is a parallelism in this passage, a poetic device we find rather often in the psalms. A parallelism can be used in such a way so that a second phrase repeats, amplifies, or even defines the first phrase.

In this case, I think the second phrase is "a willing spirit," and it is used to define the first phrase, "a clean heart." A clean heart, therefore, is a willing heart, a submissive self, a personality yielded to God. A clean heart is not the heart we have cleaned up ourselves to make it presentable to God. No, a clean heart is a heart given over to God for him to clean, to purge, to purify, to wash, to make new, to make right.

Notice please that the psalmist knows full well that *we cannot clean our own hearts*. Only God can clean our hearts. That's God's part in our salvation. Our part is surrendering our hearts to God so that they can be made clean. God makes it possible for our whole personality—our thoughts, feelings, wills, actions—to be made clean through the work of the Holy Spirit that dwells within each of us. But we must "work together with him," as Paul says in 2 Corinthians. Allowing God to clean our hearts is how we keep from accepting the grace of God in vain.

The communion liturgy that is found in our hymnals includes these familiar words as part of the Great Thanksgiving: "Lift up your hearts. We lift them up to the Lord." That is what I ask you to do during this lenten season that begins this week. Lift up your hearts to the Lord. Lift up to the Lord your complete heart, not holding any part of it back. Lift up to the Lord your contrite heart, a heart that is humble. Lift up to the Lord your clean heart, a heart that is willing to be cleansed by the power of God. That is the kind of heart God wants us to have and the kind of heart we should be giving to God.