

“Reality Christianity” - 2010 Winter Teaching/Preaching Series – Part 1: “Real Hearts”

Isaiah 29:13-14, 18-23; Matthew 23:1-7, 13

First Sunday after Epiphany: January 10, 2009 – Leaders’ Installation Service

A homily by Rev. Dr. Ivan H.M. Peden

Copyright: 2010, I. Peden

MUMC, Thomasville, NC

=====

In Matthew’s gospel Jesus recited an ancient commandment given to Israel called the *Shema*: “Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is One, and you shall love the Lord with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” Part 1 of our new Winter Teaching and Preaching Series called *Reality Christianity* is entitled “*Real Hearts*.” It’s about loving the Lord our God with a real heart ...with a whole heart.

Hopefully, all of us pay close attention to the amazing organ in our bodies called a heart. It is essential that we maintain a healthy heart. We know that we should eat right, exercise regularly, and get enough sleep in order to take care of our hearts. We all want to be “heart healthy” people.

We have tended to romanticize the word “heart” in our American culture. We primarily understand it as the site of our emotions. In biblical culture the word “heart” symbolized the center of the entire person, not just the emotions. If one wanted to know the measure of a person, it was the state of the heart that mattered. Some of the words and phrases we use about the heart still carry this larger biblical meaning: “a kind heart,” “an open heart,” but there are others that carry ambiguous and even negative connotations, such as “a broken heart,” or “heart sore,” or “hard hearted,” or “a heavy heart,” or “heartless.” All of these words express the idea that when the health of a heart is measured something important is being said about the quality of our lives.

One of the earliest Christian monks, a desert father of the fourth century by the name of Abba Pambo, said, “If you have a heart you can be saved.” What Pambo meant was that if we can be in touch with the center place in our lives, if we can be open to that place and all that is there - where our lives find meaning and purpose, and where integrity and hope are found - we will become whole. For it is there that we encounter God. It is the deep place ...the center within us where the divine physician is working: where heart repairs are occurring, where heart beats are being regulated, where we are being made whole.

Jesus clearly understood this heart place. It is the place where motivation is crucial. It is also the secret place, and it is from this place that genuine spirituality emerges. It is the place where a heart starts beating more and more like God's. It is the "conversion place" where we can experience what we call "a change of heart" and continue on our spiritual journey to a deeper joy.

Jesus accused the Scribes and Pharisees of ignoring this heart place in their practice of Judaism. He had some very cutting things to say to the religious leaders of his day who thought and taught that observance of the minute details of Jewish rituals was what God required. Jesus confronted the preachers and teachers of his day, condemning their religious practices, as strongly as the Old Testament prophets like Isaiah had confronted God's people in former days. We heard about these confrontations in our scripture readings today.

Rob Bell in his DVD called *Sunday* – watched by those of us who attended the Wednesday night program – warns, as did Jesus and many of the prophets before him, against going through the motions or "playing church" or trying to be religious instead of being real Christians with real hearts that have been given to the Lord. What does this mean? I guess we have to begin by asking ourselves whether our Christian faith is truly authentic, genuine, transparent and sincere. Bell poses the question like this: "How do we know that God has our hearts, and that we're not just going through the motions?"

One way to attempt to answer Bell's question is to evaluate the quality of our lives. We should ask: "What is it about us that makes us different from others, including other church-going people?" An early church father, Tertullian, recorded that non-Christians who observed the growth of the early church, said: "See how these Christians love one another." It was when people outside the church saw that the followers of Jesus Christ had changed hearts ...that they sincerely loved and cared for one another – that they were drawn to the church and wanted to be included, saying: "Here is the answer for my life, and for the life of my family, and for my community, and for my nation because here I see and hear the beating of God's loving heart."

In 2010 we can make a difference in Thomasville and the Triad region, we can have people saying of us, "See how those people at 'The Big Rock Church' love one another and

love all God's people. We can become a more intentional, inclusive, open congregation – a congregation with *open hearts, open minds, open doors* – always welcoming and encouraging new members to become more involved.

The main point of Bell's DVD is to say if of late we have attended church, or sang in the choir, or ushered, or prayed, or read scripture, or preached just out of a sense of duty, or because it is the so-called "done thing," or because it helps to make us look good in the eyes of others, then our hearts have not been healthy. The start of a New Year provides us with a great opportunity to make a new spiritual beginning ...to get our hearts to beat "in synch" with God's heart. The bottom line is that the Lord wants our hearts, not some token gesture or empty ritual which attending service on Sunday, or singing in the choir or praise team, or serving on church committees, or even pledging our time and talents can become.

Let us resolve to make 2010 a year when we give your hearts fully to the Lord ...or re-connect our hearts with God's heart ...when we commit ourselves anew by giving our *all* to the Lord. I used to sing a hymn in South Africa that started with the words: *What Shall We Offer our Good Lord?* What we shall offer our good Lord this year is everything we are and everything we have. Then our hearts will begin to beat like God's and others will notice and be drawn to ask: "What is it about you? What is going on there at Memorial? What has made such a difference in your lives?" And the circle of love and commitment to Christ will grow ...will expand ...will incorporate more people ...those who look like us and those who don't ...those who talk like us and those who don't ...but there will be a common bond and that will be our love for Jesus Christ and for one another.

Remember one more thing: God has a big heart. God loves humankind in its entirety. God loves widely and broadly, and God wants us to love widely and broadly, too. That is why I emphasize that to have real hearts means to have God's incorporating, inclusive love rather than a selective, exclusive love. This is *agape* love ... it is unconditional ... it is freely given without needing to receive anything in return ... it is accepting people who reflect diversity without judgment or prejudice. Reality Christianity is about making a daily commitment to love God's world with real hearts – with God's heart that is big enough to incorporate all humankind.

A psalmist wrote these words: “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless God’s holy name.” What a wonderful way to start 2010. In other words, everything we are and everything that is within us we can bring to God, that is, our real hearts. It is the only way to ensure that we at Memorial will be a people with spiritually healthy hearts.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.