

THE WORD FROM GILEAD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
August 16, 2020; 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

SCRIPTURE READING

Romans 12:1-9

¹ I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual act of worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God--what is good and acceptable and perfect.

³ For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has given you. ⁴ For just as each one of us has one body with many parts, and not all the parts have the same function, ⁵ so all of us, though we may be many, form one body in Christ, and each of us is part of one another. ⁶ We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸ the preacher, in preaching; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

⁹ Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;

SCRIPTURE READING

Matthew 15:10-20

¹⁰ Jesus called to the crowd and said to them, "Listen and understand: ¹¹ it is not what enters your mouth that defiles you; it is what comes out of your mouth that defiles you." ¹² Then the disciples approached and said to him, "Do you realize that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?" ¹³ Jesus answered, "Every

plant that my Abba God in heaven has not planted will be pulled up by the roots.

¹⁴ Ignore them; they are blind people leading other blind people. And when the blind lead the blind, they will all fall into a ditch." ¹⁵ But Peter said to him, "Explain this parable to us." ¹⁶ Then Jesus said, "Are you still without understanding? ¹⁷ Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? ¹⁸ But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, infidelity, promiscuity, theft, lying, and foul language. ²⁰ These are what defile a person, not eating with unwashed hands."

SERMON

"Inside Out, Outside In"

Rev. Martin McGeachy

Let's jump into the heart of the matter right away. Because Jesus is clear: What comes from the heart is what matters. I can say, "I will never steal from my neighbor. I would never do that." That could be a code I live by; I could be absolutely resolved. "I'm not the kind of person who would steal from my neighbor." But if I lust after my neighbor's house; or spouse, or ass (Exodus 20:17), and in my heart I can't stand that so-in-so—never cleans up their yard, always rude... in the first place, I've already sinned against my neighbor by letting those feelings have a party in my head and my heart, and in the next place, I may well convince myself that I deserve my neighbor's donkey, and I may just take it some night. "That neighbor doesn't even take care of the donkey! It would be the Christian thing for me to take it. It's not stealing, it's

appropriating. Anyway, I deserve it!" And I kind of do deserve that negative life I've chosen.

Remember how in high school you'd get two grades on your English paper, for form and content? I taught College English years ago, and sometimes I gave out A's over F's, when someone knew the rules of grammar but whose ideas and concepts were off the rails. And sometimes I gave F's over A's. I had a student who was to write me a descriptive essay, and this kid could not spell worth a lick, had no idea what punctuation was—but wrote the most wonderful description of an outhouse, right down to the scratchy walls, spider webs, and Sears catalog for toilet paper. He had a heart for writing. Dr. Coleman had failed him in Composition 101 the year before, but I told him he could write. And armed with that heart of creativity, we worked together on his spelling and punctuation, and he ended the semester with an A from Mr. McGeachy. Once his heart was right, the rules fell into place.

Scripture speaks several times of confessing our faith in the Lord, but Romans 10:9 is explicit: "If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." We can't just say it; we have to believe it, too! The words are easy to speak, but mere syllables, gobbledygook, without belief to back them up. It's the believing that's the important part. "Jesus is Lord" isn't a motto to embroider on a pillow. Jesus is the Lord of peace, love, sacrifice, forgiveness, justice, and humility, and how many church people are disciples of all that? Why are churches in decline? Well, there are lots of reasons—distractions from mass media, mass transit that can take us anywhere so we're no longer rooted to a small community church; but a large factor in why folks don't come is that they see that in church, folks say one thing, but they don't appear to believe it when they're out of the sanctuary.

"Sanctuary" by definition means a safe place to stay, and perhaps hide from the outside world. What happens when we leave the sanctuary, or finish our yoga meditation, or come down from the mountaintop view of the sunrise, all that centeredness that worship brings? Life kicks us in the posterior, or other vulnerable spots. And we get mad, sad, bad, and our hearts, minds and actions reflect it—we are then being conformed to the world, transformed by its values and circumstances.

Paul writes that our spiritual worship, which is not the words we say in church, but the worship in our hearts, calls to us: Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:2) Not only do we allow ourselves not to be conformed by the world, its external circumstances and values, but we also work to be transformed by the renewing of our minds—that is, get our heart in the right place. And that, by the way, is an acknowledgement that it isn't in the right place, not yet. After all, we do live in this world we're trying not to conform to as we instead try to get the world to conform to God's love. While we keep working, we seek progress, not perfection, discerning the goodness and perfection of God.

One reason we get our hearts in the wrong place even when we're trying to do what's right is that we have a tendency to decide that the way we do what's right is better than what everyone else does. In fact, my way isn't just better, it's the best. That leads to judging others for being wrong (again, a sin), which keeps leading our hearts astray, to where we think ours is the only way, and from there it's an easy step, even a goose step march towards oppressing in the most horrific ways those different from us.

Part of the heart's right place is humility. Verse 3 of our reading from Romans 12 reminds us "not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has given you." Remember, Scripture says, you too have been brought out of the slavery of sin. We all have. You're not special... except that everyone is special (though I guess that's an oxymoron). Remember your neighbor's worth, but remember your own. Although the chapter starts with a caution toward being humble, it leads into an acknowledgement of our gifts. A heart that's in the right place knows that it is valuable and beautiful, but no more or less than everyone else. Sometimes it's our own insecurity that keeps us from seeing the value in others. Being in balance means celebrating and nurturing our own gifts, and remembering that our annoying neighbor has some divine stuff too.

Another aspect of the heart's balancing act is that being in the right head & heart space leads to right actions. One follows another. Our good works flow from a heart that is in peace, grace, and faith. But it's not just what the heart feels that matters. We're not just balancing emotions. Jesus talks about what emanates from the heart, but Paul talks about the mind—and these two cannot be separated. Feelings and thoughts intertwine from within, and guess what? Actions that our mind tell us to do even when our emotions don't want it can change our hearts. I have a friend in a 12-step program who says that when she's struggling to take the next right step, and feels challenged, something as simple as getting up and going for a brief walk, or dusting the furniture can break the mental thought-loop that's causing her trouble. The reminder motto is, "Move a muscle, change a thought."

That reminds me of the old song, "Smile, though your heart is breaking..."
Light up your face with gladness, Hide every trace of sadness
Although a tear maybe ever so near
That's the time you must keep on trying; Smile- what's the use of crying
You'll find that life is still worthwhile, If you just smile
(*"Smile," Music by Charlie Chaplin, Lyrics by John Turner and Geoffrey Parsons*)

It's not about denial of feelings, but acting to change them. Scientists say that no matter what we feel, the physical act of smiling makes us feel better, at least a little. "Act As If," I've heard, or "Fake it 'till you make it." Romans 12:8-9 says both to be cheerful in our compassion and to let our love be genuine. Well, I'm here to tell you, compassionate people don't always feel cheerful, but they still have to show up and do the work of compassion. So cheerfully we act as if, and as verse 9 finishes, "hold fast to what is good."

Again, it's a balancing act. I'm not saying we shouldn't be who we really are, nor is Scripture. I'm aware that sometimes little girls are told to smile more ("you're prettier when you smile!"); boys are sometime told not to express feelings. Little boys don't cry,, right? Or, across all genders, we're often told it's not polite to express negative emotions. That is NOT what I'm saying. Sometimes getting our heart right means bolstering our fearful heart with the confidence to say what needs to be said, and call out what's wrong.

Longtime listeners know that one of my least favorite statements is, "I'm just saying what I feel," which has usually followed a statement of complaint or criticism. I always want to respond with my mother's motto, "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything," but I understand that bragging about spouting whatever one feels stems from a desire for greater honesty among us, and there's no doubt there were times my mother (and I) needed to speak up instead of remain silent—but the Bible calls us to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15), so please do not say just what you feel to me unless it's been put through the filter of Biblical love. Our opening hymn, "Take My Life," petitions God to take us and remake us, and I like that it sings of taking our wills, our hands, and our hearts. Sometimes we need God's help with what we will, what we think, what we feel, and what we do. That balancing act is a supernatural miracle of no longer being "conformed to this world, but being transformed" by the renewing of our minds and hearts by the Holy Spirit. (Romans 12:2) *Take my will, and make it Thine; It shall be no longer mine. Take my heart, it is Thine own; It shall be Thy royal throne, It shall be Thy royal throne.*

I'm just saying what I want to feel.

Here's the thing about our balancing act—it's inside out, outside in. Our actions create our thoughts and feelings, and vice-versa—it's all a part of getting our heart right. Sometimes the action I take to change my own heart is singing. Years ago, when I was struggling with depression, I made what we used to call a "mix-tape" with a variety of uplifting, hopeful, inspiring songs that I could sing along to. When I could manage to sing, it really did change my feelings for the better. Last Sunday we closed the sermon with a meditation time underscored by my singing of the hymn "Calm to the Waves," which has a calming tune; and in the lyrics as Jesus calls to the storm to be still, in the music his Spirit also calls to us to calm our storms:

*Calm to the waves. Calm to the wind. Jesus whispers, "Peace, be still."
Balm to our hearts. Fears at an end. In stillness, hear his voice.*

(Mary Louis Bringle, lyrics; Thomas Pavlechko, music. Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013. "Calm to the Waves," Hymn #184.)

One of the most famous examples of a hymn which is crafted as an external action to create a new internal reality, an enacted prayer, is "It Is Well with My Soul." The text was written by Horatio G. Spafford in 1873. Not long after he was financially ruined and his four-year-old son tragically died in the Great Chicago Fire, his wife and four daughters were sailing to England when they were struck by another vessel and their ship sank. His children perished. He immediately set sail to join his wife in Europe, and en route the captain of his ship identified the approximate place the

shipwreck had occurred. It was in that moment that he began to write these now famous lines which we all sing to strengthen our faith:

*When peace like a river attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll,
whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say, it is well, it is well with my soul.*

Was it well within his soul as his ship passed over the watery grave of his children? No. That is why he needed to write the song.

(Petersen, William J. and Randy Petersen, The One Year Book of Hymns, Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 1995, February 4)

Do I preach you sermons because my life is perfect and you need to emulate me? No, I do it because these are the words I need to get out there, in the hopes that they may get in here, in my heart. I'm lucky. I get to preach a sermon every week. Preach to yourself. Speak the truth in love. Say the right words of kindness and honesty to yourself, and take the right actions for yourself.

Set yourself up for success. Right now, churches and schools are reopening all over the country, and we're working hard to create safe practices to make our openings successful. When you think your 16-month-old is about to start walking, you don't set them down in slippers on a waxed floor next to the glass coffee table and throw a few marbles around as an extra challenge; you put them in those adorable baby sneakers, bring them into the living room on the carpet, and you hold their hand and help them to walk. I'm struck by that image—a loving parent reaching down to tightly grasp a child's up-stretched arms, and guiding them into success. There's a reason 1 Timothy 2:8 enjoins us to lift up holy hands in prayer, and Lamentations 3:41 to lift our hearts and hands to God. Our Abba in Heaven will hold both our hands and hearts, help us to balance, and take the next right step.

Amen.