

Transplanted Hearts

Jesus has some harsh words to say in our Gospel today. Having told us that murder, lust, and adultery happen in the heart long before any deed is carried out, Jesus goes on to tell us how we should treat such sins of the heart. He says, “²⁹ *If your right eye causes you to stumble, take it out and throw it away from you! It is better for you that one of your members should be lost than that your whole body should be thrown into hell.* ³⁰ *If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away from you! It is better for you that one of your members should be lost than that your whole body should go into hell,*” (Matt. 5:29-30).

As Jesus preached His Sermon on the Mount, of which these words are part, He confronted and admonished many people, believers and unbelievers alike. What He had to say here, regarding sins of the heart and how to treat them, is addressed specifically to believers. After all, only believers care about sin and what it does to their relationship to God and how it might affect their eternal destiny.

Scholars have argued about what Jesus meant in this passage, particularly when He talked about cutting off limbs and plucking out eyes. Some suggest that He is making reference to the Church as His body. Later, you may recall, St. Paul would go on to write about the different parts of the body that make up the Church. He said, “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ..If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body.”

So, some think Jesus is dealing here with excommunication and that it is sometimes necessary to remove a person from the church in order to keep other members of the body, the Church, from falling into sin. If that is the case then what Jesus said about plucking out the eye and cutting off the hand is metaphorical. The body is the Church and the eye or the hand that is cut off is a member who has gone astray.

It seems more likely though that Jesus is using hyperbole. In saying we Christians should pluck out our eyes or cut off our hands to avoid sin and condemnation He’s showing us our need to take radical action in dealing with our sin, in this case, our impure thoughts. After all, it isn’t actually the eye or the hand that causes us to sin. It’s the heart. “*Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony and slander.*” That’s what Jesus said in a verse right before the reading for today.

So, rather than buying in to our culture’s concept of how pure the heart is and accepting the notion that God wants us to give Him our heart as some sort of gesture of obedience, or, of submission, what we really need to do is tear our heart out and throw it away that God might give us a new one. What we really need, and what God gives us in Christ, is a heart transplant. “*And I will give them one heart (God says), and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God,*” (Ezek. 36:26ff).

Since it is our hearts that are sick and our thoughts that are every bit as grievous to God as are our actions, how then shall we deal with those thoughts? How shall we tear out our heart, so to speak, that God might give us a new one?

Well, God doesn’t call us to anything without showing us exactly what it is that He desires. King David was, of course, a child of God through faith in God’s promises, just as you are a child of God through faith in His Son and in His promises. David, you may recall, let the sins of his heart get the best of him. He looked

at Bathsheba as she sunbathed on the roof of the house. He lusted for her and then he schemed a way to have her, which included the murder of her husband, Uriah.

David came to see the seriousness of his sin when Nathan, God's prophet, told him a story that depicted just how ruthless David had been toward Uriah, and, also toward Bathsheba. David, having recognized his sin, said, "*As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die, and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.*" Moved to repentance, David then turned to God and said, "*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit,*" (Ps. 51).

God gives us a heart transplant, taking out our old dead heart, our heart of stone and replacing it with a new one, one that is tuned to His will and His ways. He responds to our heartfelt cries of repentance with His grace and forgiveness. And our prayer is the same of David's. "Create in me a clean heart, O God," that I might not fall into sins of my eyes and hands.

All of this talk about plucking out our eyes and cutting off our hands presents us with a picture of what salt and light look like, a picture of who we are as God's Church and how we are to live with each other. Do we sin and fall short of God's expectation for his children? Yes, we do. Confronted with our sin and shortcomings, we repent and confess our sins of thought and attitude, of word and deed, asking forgiveness for Jesus's sake and for the strength of God's Spirit to turn us away from these sins and to live at peace with one another, loving and serving each other, as Christ Jesus continues to love and serve us. In short, what we do everyday is confess to God our need for a new heart and what He does every day, by His grace, is give us a heart transplant.