

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My text is from our First Lesson, from the Seventeenth Chapter of Jeremiah:

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?(Jeremiah 17:9, KJV)

I do believe that this text rather threw our Monday Morning Bible Class into fair depression. That early week Bible study is what is called a "pericope study," which means that each Monday morning we study the appointed Bible readings for the upcoming Sunday. It is good preparation for Sunday worship, opening our eyes and enlarging our perspective on the wealth of spiritual instruction available in our Sunday Scripture lessons. But this time, this text about the heart being deceitful about all things and desperately wicked left us downhearted. As the hour was ending, I gave it a try, I said to the class, "Ummm, I'm rather in the mood to take a bit of break from preaching and so if any of you would like to preach this Sunday, well, I'll gladly surrender the pulpit to you." But they said, "No, sir! You're the pastor. You're the one who has to climb up into that pulpit. But we'll be there, listening!"

So, here goes. I will tell you my theme in advance: The path of purity and goodness of heart lies open to you and to me *regardless* of the deceitfulness and wickedness of the human heart. We are not debarred from the path of life, no matter how awful we have been in the past, no matter how black-hearted. The Bible says that when Adam and Eve fell into sin, they were expelled from the Garden of Eden and that the way back is prevented to them by cherubim and a "flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life." (Gen. 3:24) But the most holy Gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ is that there is no obstacle, no flaming sword, barring us from a new heart, for Jesus is risen, and we are free to follow his good and gentle heart into our own goodness and gentleness of heart. Do not be overly discouraged, then, by this saying from Jeremiah. The path of holiness of life and purity of heart still lies open to you.

So, that's my theme. Now let's try to broaden the perspective on this passage from Jeremiah. Let's acknowledge right away that we do well to be troubled by this passage about the deceitful and wicked human heart. It tends to wreck things. Our other Bible readings this morning so very reasonably discuss the two paths available to us humans — the path of righteousness, on the one hand, and the path of sin, on the other. But then this passage in Jeremiah comes along and threatens to ruin things.

The foundational text among these Bible readings seems to be our Psalm — Psalm 1. There is a sense of motion in this Psalm — either of growth and prospering or of slowing down under the lethargy of sin, so that the soul becomes sluggish and ultimately insubstantial, like chaff blown by the wind. Notice this decline in the first verse of the Psalm. The advantage, the Psalm says, is with the one who is not slowed down by sin:

¹Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful.

And so, the one who lingers with sin, becoming comfortable with it, is not blessed. Rather, blessing goes to the one who delights in the law of the Lord:

²But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night.
³And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper.

But, as for the ungodly, they shall not do well in the end:

⁴The ungodly are not so: but are like the chaff which the wind driveth away.

All the advantages are with the one path rather than the other, judging not only by our Psalm, but also by our readings from Jeremiah and St. Luke. Blessing, flourishing, and joy are with the pious, but woes, exhaustion, and weeping are in store for the wicked.

So, here we are in the middle, with two paths stretching before us. We can walk in the way of the Lord and flourish, or we can walk in the way of sin and perish.

The problem is this text from Jeremiah about the human heart:

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?(Jeremiah 17:9, KJV)

This is a worrisome text because it suggests that we here in the middle, caught continually between the paths of piety and sin, are not neutral, rational decisions makers, but flawed and prejudiced people. Our heart ails us! Our heart is "deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked."

Do you see why this text laid low our Monday Morning Bible Class? We were struck and discouraged by this claim by the prophet Jeremiah. If our heart is "desperately wicked," what is the point of even trying? What is the point of the good path, when we are built to incline toward t'other?

Therefore, I want to wrestle with this text about the wicked human heart. I think we shall see that this text speaks the truth and yet not all of the truth. The fullness of truth speaks of a wonder: a new heart — a heart that

can learn to love the ways of piety — a new heart and new spirit within us.

First off, let us try to reckon with the truth of Jeremiah's saying. It is not idiosyncratic to the Bible. It is not a strange saying out of step with the Bible, but affirmed more than once. The heart is desperately wicked. We are a fallen race. We are far too prone to follow the example of our ancestors, Adam and Eve, and disobey the Word of the Lord.

Think of the depths to which our human race had fallen in the days of Noah:

⁵And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. ⁶And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart...(Genesis 6:5-6, KJV)

You know how the story goes — about the flood and the ark and the rainbow and the divine determination to never destroy the earth again by a flood. And yet, the Bible does not say that the new generations of people after the flood were any better than those before, but simply that the Lord resolves to not destroy them again with a flood.

So, we move on in the Bible and eventually we reach this striking passage in the Psalms:

²The LORD looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, and seek God. ³They are all gone aside, they are all together become filthy: there is none that doeth good, no, not one.(Psalm 14:2-3, KJV)¹

Again, we open our Bible to the book of Isaiah, and we find this heartbreaking passage upon which we meditate during Holy Week:

⁶All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.(Isaiah 53:6, KJV)

And think of King David, who at one point in his life combined in one deed both the heart's desperate wickedness *and* its self-deception. I am speaking of his adultery with Bathsheba, together with his betrayal and ultimate murder of her faithful husband Uriah. David does this wickedness, but remains perfectly content with himself, as if he had done no wrong. He merrily goes on his way until at last the prophet Nathan opened his eyes to his sins. In his self-satisfaction, David illustrates a saying of one of the old preachers that...

¹ We could also refer to Ecclesiastes 9:3: This is an evil among all things that are done under the sun, that there is one event unto all: yea, also the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live, and after that they go to the dead.

Man is much like a silkworm, he is a spinner and weaver by nature. A robe of righteousness is wrought out for him, but he will not have it; he will spin for himself, and like the silkworm, he spins, and spins, and he only spins himself a shroud.²

And perhaps most moving of all is an autobiographical passage from St. Paul in which he groans about the nature of his heart, how it seems that he is in bondage to sin:

¹⁵I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate....I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. ¹⁹For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. ²⁴Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?(Romans 7:15-24, NRS)

Alas, Jeremiah speaks the truth. The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. Jeremiah speaks the truth, I say, but not the fullness of truth.

So let's turn to the rest of the story about the human heart. Let's begin with the fact that, besides the wickedness of the human heart, the Bible also knows about forgiveness and a clean heart. Let me cite two passages from the Old Testament.

First, from Isaiah, the book that notes that "all we like sheep have gone astray," we also have this beautiful and encouraging saying:

Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.(Isa 1:18)

And then, from King David, who did such wickedness toward Bathsheba and Uriah, we have this confident prayer from Psalm 51:

¹⁰Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me. ¹¹Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me. ¹²Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit.(Psalm 51:10-12)

So, the Bible has a complex witness concerning the human heart. It is capable of wickedness and self-deception, yes, but also it is capable of forgiveness, purity, and joy.

Second the Bible's great exhortation to "love thy neighbor" expresses a kind of optimism about our neighbor. It asks us to "judge not, that we not be judged." It asks that we credit our neighbor with more

²Charles Spurgeon, "The Deep-Seated Character of Sin," sermon from 1868.

than a heart that is “desperately wicked,” but also a heart capable of justice and goodness.

Take two verses, for example, from St. Paul’s great “Love Chapter” (First Corinthians 13):

Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. ⁷Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸Love never ends...

That is, there is a kind of naiveté appropriate for a Christian. We are not to regard our neighbors with suspicion, as if their hearts were only “desperately wicked.” Rather, we are “believe all things, hope all things.” We are to “rejoice in the right,” believing that there really is “the right” there in our neighbor to be rejoiced at.

And then, there is the witness of St. Paul himself — the one who previously groaned that he is incapable of doing the good within him, but only the sin that dwells there. This same man is also able to say that in spite of sin within his heart, the grace of God shed forth in his heart has not be “in vain”:

⁹For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰But by the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain... (1 Cor 15:9-10)

And now, what of us? What shall we say concerning ourselves in face of Jeremiah’s claim that our hearts are desperately wicked.

First off, I think we can take some comfort in the idea that the Bible knows us at our worst, and yet the Lord loves us nonetheless. The Bible and the faith of the Church know that we are inclined to fall away from Jesus.

And therefore when the Bible exhorts us toward holiness of life, it is not naïve in doing so. It does not suppose us to be saints. But it does suppose a basic kind of optimism about you and me: that we, in spite of our inclination toward self-deception and wickedness, are fit vessels for God’s grace, and therefore we can become a walking, talking miracle on earth: a new man, a new woman, who delights in the law of the Lord and who flourishes like a tree planted by rivers of water.

We are fit vessels for God’s grace. Suppose some mean-hearted psychoanalyst or Puritan preacher skilled in the workings of the soul were to strip away our defenses one by one. All that self-righteousness that humanity “the silkworm” spins and spins — all those ways by which the human heart deceives even itself...suppose this analyst were right on the verge of revealing us to have hearts that are “deceitful above all things and desperately wicked.” The truth is, even at the last minute we could slip away. We could be gone, no longer there, so that the analyst would be left wondering, “Where’d he go? Where’s she go? What I see now is not a desperately wicked heart, but rather a heart that is starting to become good!”

I am speaking of a miracle, but one available to you and to me. Of course there is truth in Jeremiah’s saying. We are indeed capable of great self-deception and wickedness. But also this is true about us: We are the beneficiaries of a miracle — the greatest miracle of all: the resurrection of Jesus. For *his* heart is not deceptive, not in the slightest, and his heart is not “desperately wicked,” but rather gentle and pure and full of love.

If we followed our own heart, we might land in trouble. But we are free to follow him, with all his goodness and purity. And in the following, we will become new creatures, better people, the kind of people who are a help to our neighbors and a credit to the one we follow, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.