



“The Heart of the Matter”

Reformation Sunday

Saturday & Sunday, October 24-25, 2020
The Reverend Dr. Jack M. Horner, Jr.
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 46;
Romans 3:19-28; John 8:31-36

Grace and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

This past week I went to one of my favorite places in the whole wide world. It's a place for me to recharge spiritually, it's the Lutheran monastery in Michigan, St. Augustine's House. One of only two Lutheran, Benedictine communities in the world. Our day began at 5:10 in the morning with the first of 7 daily prayer services that happen throughout the day. What I love about it is you are immersed in God's word and prayer during that time. Things are never rushed, and you learn to breath the prayers and the psalms especially which make up so much of those daily prayer services.

But it is not just the place of St. Augustine's House, it is also the people, the other visitors who happen to be there and their experiences. The brothers who are there and especially the Prior who was there who is my former internship supervisor when I was in seminary. And of course, there is also the time of prayer which centers around the Psalms. Over and over and over again the reading of the Psalms. And there is the emersion of God's word through the prayer offices that happen throughout that day.

Maybe you have people in your life that help you recharge your batteries. A friend, a spouse, or maybe a family member. Or perhaps like St. Augustine's House there is a place that is special in your life, a vacation spot, maybe a cabin in the woods, or perhaps even church. I would be willing to bet there's also a word, maybe your confirmation verse or a piece of scripture that was particularly meaningful to you. Maybe the 23rd Psalm, "The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want anything." Or perhaps there is a special prayer in your life, "Now I lay me down to sleep," or "Our Father, who art in heaven." It is important for you and for me to cultivate these things in our life. These are the things which help center our life in Christ. They help us to see what is really important, what's eternal, those people, those places, those prayers, the word, they are like a beating heart for our soul. They give you life.

You know your heart is an amazing organ. It beats 100,000 times a day. It pumps 2,000 gallons of blood a day. This nutrient filled blood and oxygen goes through your body.

Oxygen goes everywhere from your lungs to the smallest capillary. And then it brings the blood back again to be rejuvenated and restored to begin the process all over again. Each breath, each heartbeat, giving you life.

The heart is so important, we have so many phrases that are related to the heart. One is the sermon title, The Heart of the Matter. But there are others like my heart is set on it, or that one has heart and soul, or from the bottom of my heart, or can you find it in your heart maybe to do something for another person, or you say to somebody that is struggling, take heart. If you are a Southerner maybe you say, "Bless your heart."

The Bible mentions the heart over 800 times. The heart is that place where we feel, we think, and we seek after God. And one of the most famous heart passages is in Jeremiah in the 31st chapter. It serves as the climax of Jeremiah's teaching. After he has been railing on the wayward Israelites for thirty chapters, the Israelites who have abandoned God's covenant and God's commandments, Jeremiah tells the people that God is going to do something new for them. God is going to deal with human beings differently. God is going to make a new covenant and it will be written on the people's hearts. The word in Hebrew literally has the connotation of something be chiseled or carved or etched into their heart. God is going to put some muscle into placing on their hearts his love and grace. The old covenant represented by the Ten Commandments was made when God brought the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and it served as a legal contract. If you do this, God said, then I will do this.

Of course, the Israelites didn't fulfill the contract. No sooner than Moses had received the Ten Commandments on stone tablets the people were down in the valley below melting down gold to make an idol.

In our situation of sin and brokenness that result in relationships because of it, you and I can't blame God. The rules were clear, we just don't want to follow them.

The new covenant that God offers is based on grace. God writes it within us. God carves it on our hearts, and it will be a principle for living. Not based on what we have done or what we should do but based on what God in Jesus Christ has already done for us through his death and resurrection. The old covenant was for the people of Israel. This new covenant will be for people throughout the whole world. And it will not be bound by time or situation. This new covenant lasts forever.

It's like a tattoo or a brand, it is permanent. Like the cross of Christ in baptism made with oil, but forever marked on your forehead. Freed from sin and death and made new in the light of Christ.

The new heart that we are offered shows us the depth of God's love for us. Through his death and resurrection, we are free to be the people that God wants us to be. You don't deserve it, you can't recreate it, you can't make it happen no matter how hard you

work. It's already written on the hearts of people and we are given the power to do the right things because Jesus has freed us from sin and death.

One of the readings that we had at St. Augustine's House in the morning vidual service, that's the 5:10 one, was from St. Augustine himself and he said, "The deeper our faith, the stronger our hope, the greater our desire, the larger will be our capacity to receive that gift, which is very great indeed. No ear has heard it; it has no sound. It has not entered man's heart; man's heart has entered it." (From a letter to Proba)

Two thousand years after Jeremiah, Martin Luther became a prophet in his own time, having his heart changed as he experiences God in a personal way. Like St. Paul he experienced a life-changing event, a heart changing event. Caught up in a violent thunderstorm he called out to God to save him my becoming a monk. The storm turned to a trickle and, soon after he left law school and entered the monastery in Erfurt, Germany.

By 1517, Luther was a respected priest and scholar. Reading Paul's letter to the Romans, he realized that people are made right with God. They are justified by faith through the grace of God, and not because of their own good works that they do. God touches your heart and gives you faith that leads to serving others and loving neighbor. So, the cry of ***semper reformanda***, always reforming, called the church to focus on that grace and the proclamation of the gospel. That is the heart of the matter for life in the church, in our relationship with God and with others.

503 years later the Lutheran Church celebrates this Reformation spirit and heart. God gives us a heart for the gospel, a message of love, grace, and forgiveness and serving others.

Former Secretary General of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjold, expressed this longing for a new heart and a prayer found in his personal journal "***Markings***" that was published after his tragic death. He writes, Give us

- A pure heart that we may see you.
- A humble heart that we may hear you.
- A heart of love that we may serve you.
- A heart of faith that we may love you.

Such is the new heart of love and faith that God has etched onto your heart.

Helen Keller once remarked that, "The best and most beautiful thing cannot be seen or touched. It must be felt with the heart."

And so, God says to us all, maybe in a Southern voice, "Bless your heart." Amen.

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