

Growing Up in All Ways”
 Pastor Sam Richards
 12 May 2024—Eastertide Sunday 7
 Texts: Ezekiel 11:19-21

Ezekiel 11:19 “And I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them. And I will take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh. . . . That they may walk in my statutes, and keep my ordinances, and do them; and they shall be my people, and I will be their God. (NASB 1995)

Apparently, reformation is secondary to renewal and both are a work of God. God supplies the power that brings transformation because when it comes to transformation we are more powerless than powerful! We may want to change and change may be possible—with God!—but it is God who gifts us with **singleness of heart**, or integrity of heart and that gift requires an implantation: God must insert **a new spirit**. In this precious scripture, God promises to those who turn to him **a new heart** (a heart of flesh) which replaces our former heart, a heart of stone—a hard and impervious heart—one insensitive and insensible to the will of God! A heart of stone is incapable of performing the will of God, or of fulfilling the purposes of God largely due to this insensitive insensibility. We absolutely do not feel like doing anything like walking in integrity, or like listening to God’s prompting on the spirit within us. And here’s why. The spirit in us is *inimical* to God; it is adverse, hostile and antagonistic and the housing of that oppositional spirit is our hard heart. Newness of spirit must supersede our old disposition (which was prone to rebel, and to disobey). Something of this is captured in the New Testament stress on the new covenant (which alludes to the renewal I first spoke of); the new birth results in newness of life which proceeds from this new implanted spirit (along with a suitable casing, a heart of flesh—meaning a heart that can feel, sense, attune itself to God as if aligns our spirit with God himself. The result is harmonious. The music of the spheres resonates in here—I reverberate with that music and my very being starts singing. At home, in synch—these are new sensations in a “once estranged, alienated and disaffected” life¹. But where and when as we have covered the how.

¹ Erich Fromm’s May Man Prevail. (1961) Fromm’s theory is a rather unique blend of Freud and Marx. Freud, of course, emphasized the unconscious, biological drives, repression, and so on. In other words, Freud postulated that our characters were determined by biology. Marx, on the other hand, saw people as determined by their society, and most especially by their economic systems.

Erich Fromm, Ph.D. (Sociology, University of Heidelberg, 1922) was a German-American social psychologist, psychoanalyst, sociologist, humanistic philosopher, and democratic socialist. He was a German Jew who fled the Nazi regime and settled in the United States. He was one of the founders of The William Alanson White Institute of Psychiatry, Psychoanalysis and Psychology in New York City and was associated with the Frankfurt School of critical theory. (From Goodreads: https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/1617874.May_Man_Prevail)

The Art of Loving, (1956) also by Fromm, “The Art of Loving is a tome that ought to be reprinted and re-released and promoted to help the millions of dysfunctional, discontent, and maladjusted young people found in the populations of Europe, America, and the modern Middle East. Industrialized societies in particular suffer from a poor approach to love, in its various forms and at various stages of life. Children come out as happier, more capable, and more successful adults when raised by parents who understand how to properly love them all along the way. Couples are likewise much happier and more productive in their households when they take a healthy approach to love as outlined in Fromm’s work. (Anthony Sinnott, review on Amazon (2023)

Also on my freshmen reading list for 1965 (at Bates College) was Paul Goodman’s Growing Up Absurd. (1960) another Marxist tome which fed radical movements across the country, especially at Berkley. Goodman was an anti-social voice of the “victimized.” He was a social critic who coined the phrase: the system. It buoyed up the “I’m not understood” element in mid-twentieth century America. Another untested, contemporary voice was added by Walter Kaufman, Faith of a Heretic (1959). He was “eager to find for himself in Freud what he saw that Freud found in Nietzsche”—a decidedly adolescent mind! Organized religion and other stays of traditional/conservative life were “analyzed.” He celebrated the

The scripture continues:

But as for them whose hearts walkest after the heart of their detestable things and their abominations, I will recompense their way upon their own heads,” saith the Lord God.

Ellicott comments on this verse: “**I will recompense their way.**—In striking contrast to the mercy granted to the repentant (v. 19), is set forth here, as in [Revelation 21:8](#), the Divine wrath upon the impenitent (v. 20). It has never been promised that all men shall be brought to a true sense of their relations to God, for human responsibility, and consequently power of choice, is not removed; but God’s grace is never in vain, and if it does not lead to blessing through its acceptance, must result in greater condemnation through its rejection. (Comp. [2Corinthians 2:16.](#))”

The obstinacy of idolatry is addressed directly here! “**Heart, soul and affections**, whose choice and love, **walketh after**; either secretly adhereth to or provideth for the service of idols, called here detestable things **Heart, soul and affections**, whose choice and love, **walketh after**; either secretly adhereth to or provideth for the service of idols, called here detestable things,” writes Matthew Poole. “**Heart walking after a heart**: idolatry is a bewitching sin, and steals away the heart and the promoters of idolatry propose the plausiblest arguments, **as if idols had hearts and affections** toward their worshippers to do them good; the expression in the Hebrew is somewhat unusual and harsh to our ear, but this I take to be the meaning,” he continues. Then John Gill summarizes with: **I will recompense their ways upon their own heads**, saith the Lord God, that is, punish them according to their deserts, by the sword, famine, pestilence, and captivity.

Verse 21. “**But as for them**, etc. We note the peculiar phraseology. The **heart** of the people walks not simply after **their detestable things**, but after the **heart** of those things. There is, as it were, a central unity in the evil to which they unite themselves, just as the heart of man turns to the heart of God when the two are in their ideal relation to each other. For those who did this, whether in Jerusalem or among the exiles, there was the prospect of a righteous retribution. The words close the message which Ezekiel heard in the courts of the temple in his visions, but which he was to deliver (ver. 25) to them of the Captivity. Ezekiel 11:21”—Pulpit Commentary

But where? and when? remain as questions regarding v. 19: I want to share an episode that occurred in a small, monastic community. There was a general want of coffee in the common kitchen. And all the elderly monks were dependent upon the coffee’s lift. Each would say, “It does me good, it help me get going,” or “given my age, it’s a comfort.” However, the first monk up, not wanting to feel “dull and weak even if only for a few hours,” entered the kitchen and drank up all the coffee. Then his conscience smote him. He came face to face with his selfishness—to his shame—and he excluded his two brothers. And in that cup, taken and not shared, in a fit of self-indulgence came to re present the root of all evil. He was self-condemned in his arrogance; he was arrogant with that which riches, power and position creates! There was hardness of heart itself. Jesus would have gone without and left the coffee for his brothers—he would have preferred them. And, alas, this monk did not. It is not easy to live with stoney hearts such as these.

“imperfection of the great thinkers” (all secular, non-Christians if I remember correctly)—Christian thought was cancelled by exclusion. This was propaganda for discontent and radicalism!

I had a similar wake-up call—but it doesn't have to do with a cup of coffee. It had to do with Psalm 133:

**1: Behold, how good and how pleasant it is
For brothers to dwell together in unity!
2 It is like the precious oil upon the head,
Coming down upon the beard,
Even Aaron's beard,
Coming down upon the edge of his robes.
3 It is like the dew of Hermon
Coming down upon the mountains of Zion;
For there the Lord commanded the blessing—life forever.**

It had to do with unity—how good and pleasant it is—and the conflict between that “sweet accord” which is celebrated here amongst **brothers who dwell together in unity** and the in-fighting, or contention that unbelievers observe as characteristic of the church. People, I think, experience so much conflict and controversy in the world—especially in the realm of politics, social media and the “culture wars”—that the church environment comes across as indistinguishable from the world! How does one contend for the truth peaceably? Denominational strife and doctrinal differences have the church retreating to their corners and throwing rocks, or coming out swinging. For outsiders, this strife is far from the liberty friends have to disagree; it seems mean spirited, spiteful and judgmental. And, frankly, the polarization, and intolerance of divergent points of view. It's not good press regardless.

All of this is, unhappily, at arm's length for me. Closer to home, I am specifically charged with being peaceable, not quarrelsome, gentle with those in disagreement as a pastor. And I am quite sure that my scores in these departments are uneven. I have polished off the remaining coffee so to speak. I can hope that I have kept my focus that our battle is with sin and Satan. It is not with factions in the church, or with brothers in other denominations with whom I have genuine and sincere differences. The standard is very, very high . . . clear. . . and challenging:

Ephesians 4:2-6 With all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, 3 being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.

It is definitely easier to cite than to practice, or observe. You should pray that over me regularly. Those sincere and genuine differences most often deal with secondary matters (matters not central to salvation) and, if we could carefully remember, our brothers and sisters in Christ are not the enemy—we must not act as if we are at war with them. And we must lean into the large areas of agreement that undergird our “discussions and debates.” When it comes to rebuke and correction, essential acts of church discipline, we must lean into our *loving motivation*, our desire for reconciliation and restoration. If we do not love the sinner, very little redemptive can occur. And that is the main objective.

So what is needed is a breakthrough. Where? In our hearts. We have to see the harness of heart as internal, in me and not in others—not in them. Consideration is a choice, a disposition, a way of preferring others. “Stony heart ... heart of flesh - The heart unnaturally hardened, and the heart reawakened to feelings proper to man.” Barnes'

Notes. When would this self-awareness come upon us? Now would be most excellent. May the world once again see the church and say, "See how these Christians love one another."
Amen.