

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Several of my recent sermons have considered the heart — our hearts — from a spiritual point of view not a physical one, for we know the heart physically is simply a muscle, though an important one. It's the pump in the body's circulatory system that circulates the blood through our arteries and veins and keeps us alive. Scripture says, "*the life of the flesh is in the blood*" (Lev. 17:11), and our heart pumps that life throughout our bodies.

The heart can also be used metaphorically, for example, as the center of feelings and emotions. It's a symbol of love and devotion—Valentine's Day love with heart-shaped cards and balloons and candies and so forth. When it comes to love, we also know hearts may be broken—crooners make their living singing about broken hearts. The Tin Man knew he had received a heart when, as Dorothy was departing back to Kansas, his heart was breaking. The Wizard tells us that hearts are impractical for this very reason.

The heart can also be used as a symbol or a metaphor for compassion and mercy. "Have a heart," says the one who is seeking mercy from another. And, "Oh, he is so heartless," is said about the one who is unmerciful.

Scripture speaks of the heart in this latter way, too — metaphorically — our texts do — the heart as the seat of our uncleanness, the heart as the source of our devotion and mercy. The heart is in view in our Ash Wednesday texts today — we begin Lent thinking about our heart.

Indeed, the Lord through the prophet Joel calls for us to "*return to [Him] with all your heart.*" This is an acknowledgement of our sinful penchant for straying, of being sheep that love to wander away from the Lord's ways. Why else the call to return?

Yes, the Lord here is calling us to repentance, calling us to lament our sin "*with weeping and with mourning,*" though He's not as interested in an outward show as He is in the inward sorrow for our sin and a desire to change our ways. That is, He is interested in our devotion. "*Rend your hearts*" He says, "*and not your garments.*" Or as David sang, it's not your sacrifices or burnt offerings that the Lord is looking for, but "*The sacrifices of God,*" namely, "*a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart.*" These, David sings, God "*will not despise*" (Ps. 51:16-17).

That's why I like that our Ash Wednesday Divine Service is in the evening, unlike many churches. With Ash Wednesday services in the morning or noon, Christians go to work or school with the black ash smeared across their foreheads. Of course, it's meant to be a humble recognition of our mortality — we poor sinners will die because of our sin and return to the dust. It's meant to be a humble

sign that we are penitent sinners, but it's often perceived to be a prideful display. Thus donning the ash in the evening, when all we plan to do after church is head home, wash our faces, and get into bed, seems to follow Jesus' admonition not to practice "*your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them*" and "*praised by others,*" but rather that the "*Father who sees in secret will reward you.*"

Of course, even an acknowledgment of our sin and a desire to do better is insufficient for our salvation. Our salvation is dependent on God's mercy that blots out our transgressions, on His washing that cleanses us from our sins and washes away our iniquities, on the Spirit's work in us to give us clean hearts and right spirits, hearts and spirits that look to Jesus, who by His devotion to us, by His love and compassion for us, took our sin upon Himself, took it to cross and death, that in Him we might be accounted righteous. St. Paul says it this way: "*for our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*"

We respond, then, to Jesus' devotion to us with our devotion to Him. God initiates through Christ, and we respond. Remember, "*We love because he first loved us*" (1 Jn 4:19), and His love was expressed in Jesus, in His incarnation and in His sacrifice for us, in forgiving us and giving us life. The Spirit works this devotion in us. He gives us spirits that look to Jesus as our treasure.

How shall our devotion be expressed, then, in this season of Lent? With a fast? Perhaps. "*Return to me with all your heart, with fasting ... Consecrate a fast.*" I told you in the Voice that fasting has not been a part of my Lenten discipline. But I'm going to give it a try this year. I talked to Marge about it; she's not convinced I can do it, but I'm going to try for the sake of greater devotion to Jesus. I'm going to try, knowing that through Christ, "*the Lord ... is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,*" that if I fail, I can return to the Lord knowing that the Lord does not want to make me a reproach to you and others. I started it today. Want to do it with me? I'll let you know what my fast is going to be like.

How shall our devotion be expressed? With "*a solemn assembly,*" a gathering of the people, a congregation of elders and children and infants who have been consecrated in baptismal waters and want to devote "*themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers*" (Acts 2:42)? I hope so. I hope to see you here each Wednesday.

How shall our devotion be expressed? Not only as love of the Lord our God, but also as love of our neighbors as ourselves? Showing mercy to others as we have received mercy, giving to the needy not to receive praise from men, but as the pure in

heart doing the Lord's will, receiving your reward quietly from Him? This, too, as the fruit of God's gift of a new heart.

God grant us a blessed Lent with hearts turned toward the Lord, with hearts devoted to Christ and to His gifts, with hearts filled with the sacrifices of praise and doing good and sharing what we have. May the Lord, who is pleased with such things, fill our hearts with these treasures.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.