

## Alchemy of the Heart

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Psalm 51:1-12

John 12:20-33

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March 22, 2015

*Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and right spirit within me.*

The core of Psalm 51 is in this 10th verse. It is the cry of every human being honest enough with themselves to admit that we have fallen short, we have disappointed, we have wounded others and ourselves, we have compromised what is good by our attraction to what is less than good by either a short or long shot, doing what is wrong in hopes that it will somehow turn out right, the way some folks for centuries hoped to be able to produce precious gold from baser metals.

Sir Isaac Newton, mathematician, physicist, astronomer, pioneer of much that we know as modern science, was also much less than modern in that he was attracted to the ancient belief in alchemy; the man who invented calculus, who correctly derived the law of universal gravitation, also sought the secret to the ancient and secretive pseudo-science bent on turning base metals into gold. He was convinced not only that gold could be made from simpler, less-expensive materials, but also that ancient alchemists had actually done it by some now-lost process which he hoped to recover. All he needed to do, he believed, was to unearth their secret processes. He never succeeded, of course, because — well — it was an idea that didn't "pan out," if you'll pardon the Gold Rush pun. Gold, we now know, cannot be made from anything but ... *gold*. It is an element, not owing its existence to any other combination of elements.

We know that, and we realize it is foolish to try pursue an alchemist's path to making precious gold out of other things that are not precious. Just so, a clean heart, as desired by the psalmist, is similarly pure, elemental, and not derivable by any means other than a right spirit, the natural home of a clean heart.

Having lost such a thing as a clean heart, how could it possibly be recovered? Can we, by our own effort, somehow magically erase all hurt we have caused, all guilt we have known, all shortcuts we have taken in the process of discovering that bad means lead to equally bad ends? Apparently we cannot, which is the clear reason why the psalmist's prayer asks not for the power to become right-hearted by some sort of auto-correction, but asks God for a new act of creation, a re-creation if you will - literally as transforming as the first Creation, which fashioned a world out of a watery chaos. Truly, his prayer is that God will act again in his spirit, as God acted in the very creation of the world, and make possible a clean heart, a right spirit in the place where an unclean heart and a wrong spirit now live.

During seminary often faculty would put hard to find books or unpublished papers on reserve in the

seminary's library. I was saddened to learn that it was not unusual at all for fellow students – pastors in training – to hurry over to the library as soon as such was made known and then remove those readings without bothering to go through the process of checking it out. Stealing really and cheating as well. This would happen when I was in undergraduate school as well, but somehow I thought that students training to be ministers of the church would behave better.

The psalmist was surely on to something, we are in need of clean hearts and a right spirit. And of course, you and I know, it's not just seminary students who do not do as they ought. As a freshman biology student I remember a couple of fellow lab students who always cut up during lab, distracting the less focused. Turns out they were pre-med and they tried to sabotage the academic progress of fellow students. They would come back later and do the lab work and prepare for our quizzes.

The French philosopher, Simone Weil, once declared that "All sins are attempts to fill voids." Though we may try to fill the voids in our lives with anything and everything, we remain empty because there is an empty place that is God-shaped and nothing else will fill it: not success, not fame, not fortune. Someday, if we are as acutely aware as the psalmist, we may ask God to fill that emptiness, and in the process see a sort of wholly, holy new life to which God is calling us, and find we have hearts that are freshly cleansed, spirits newly right, almost like being born again.

Or, of course, we can always choose to remain in what one preacher called "a wrecked relationship with God and other human beings," trying desperately to assert our cleanness of heart, rightness of spirit against all evidence to the contrary. Our only hope for recovery is to take the first step, which is to acknowledge that something about us is seriously out of whack, and throw ourselves on the mercy of God's court, just as the psalmist did before us.

The psalmist cry seems to be answered in the text from Jeremiah – for the prophet proclaims that God will put God's own law within us, and that God will write it on our hearts. This new way of relating to God seems also to be at the core of Jesus' ministry: the Beatitudes reveal not simply new laws but a new way of being – one that most come from the heart.

The folks followed Jesus wanting this newness – questioning and inquiring. Have you ever noticed that in the gospels, particularly John's, when someone asks Jesus what appears to be a fairly direct question, he seldom responds with a direct or obvious answer? In today's passage, there were folks John described as "some Greeks" who told Philip they wished to see Jesus. Philip told Andrew, then they both went to tell Jesus. Something must have gotten lost in the translation, because Jesus' response seems to bear no connection whatsoever with the request.

Greeks: Hi... Say, Mister, we're interested in seeing Jesus, what do you say?

Philip: Hm, I'm not sure, let me check it out with someone for you... Hey, Andrew, before you run off to become the patron Saint of Scotland, these guys have a question. They say they'd like to see Jesus. What do you think?

Andrew: Hm, I think we'd better ask Jesus.

Andrew and Philip: Hey, Jesus, these Greek guys want to see you.

Jesus: The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

Greeks, Philip, Andrew, and members of Delmar Presbyterian church all respond: Huh?

Listen, the Gospel of John is not for wimps, you've got to have ears to hear, as Jesus was fond of saying. Eyes to read wouldn't hurt either. This little dialogue takes place in John just after Jesus had ridden into Jerusalem on a donkey, with shouts and cheers and folks throwing palm branches in his path. Upon seeing this, the Pharisees said to one another, "You see, you can do nothing. Look, the world has gone after him!" (12:19) Then, as if to confirm the Pharisees' worst fears, the Greeks, representing all the non-Jewish world, approached the disciples about seeing Jesus. This, of course, makes his response more understandable. He takes it for the sign that it is, that he is to become the seed from which will grow an access to God that includes the whole world and change how we relate to God forever.

The hour had come for the Son of Man to be glorified, to be the means by which clean hearts and right spirits could be created for all the world's people. This was no spiritual alchemist's shortcut to the good by way of the not-so-bad, nor a utopian dream about the innate goodness of all people, rather it was God's own acknowledgment that people could not become good by their own device, but required an act of God, a new creation to make it happen. That is what Jesus was, and is. The new creation of God, by which our hearts, our selves, are made clean, new, and right. And perhaps in our willingness to lay aside our desperate attempts to fill the God-shaped vacuum in our hearts, in 'dying' to our misguided quests for self-satisfaction we will plant a seed that the Spirit will nourish creating a new life a life of blessing.

That is where our Lenten journey is leading us, and not only us, but anyone and everyone who shares with us the desire to see Jesus. Jesus is the answer to the Psalmist's prayer for a clean heart and a right spirit. He is the answer to all our prayers, in the end. And moreover, even better, access to Jesus is available to everyone, though someone must bring the word, someone must tell, and there is no one to do the telling about the way to clean hearts and right spirits but Philip, and Andrew, and you, and me.