

“A MATTER OF THE HEART”

6th Sun. a. Epiphany, A
Sun. & Wed., February 13 & 16, 2011
Zion Lutheran Church, Beecher, IL
Sermon Text – Matthew 5:21-37
Old Testament Reading – Deuteronomy 30:15-20
Epistle Reading – 1 Cor. 3:1-9
Gospel Reading – Matthew 5:21-37

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our blessed Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. [Amen.]

Dear friends in Christ Jesus,

Tomorrow is Valentine’s Day. Think back a bit. Think back to your first Valentine. You know... *not* when you were in third grade... and the teacher rightly made you give a valentine to everyone in the class.

No... think back to that first girl or boy that *really* meant something to you... and that one... to whom you really wanted to give a special card or gift. Remember also the agony that you probably went through as you tried to decide if you should follow your heart and ask that person to “be your Valentine!”

There was a boy who was a sophomore in high school. He had a crush on a certain girl. The problem was, he didn’t know if she *also* had feelings for him. Also, he was one of those rare boys who actually went to his parents for advice.

So he went to them and asked what they thought he ought to do. Should he risk it all and go out on a limb and give the girl a special Valentine card... *or*... should he play it safe and do nothing at this once-a-year opportunity to tell her how he felt toward her?

His parents heard him out, and then his dad said: **“Dave, when it comes to matters of the heart, we can’t tell you what to do!”**

The point that the boy’s parents made was that “matters of the heart” have to be resolved... well... *in the heart!*

That’s because some things... such as in love and personal conduct... each individual must wrestle with the question... *and* the answer!

Today. dear Christians, we hear God telling us through His Word that our relationship with Him is *also* a “matter of the heart.” And... no... this *isn’t* the romantic Valentine heart... but the spiritual heart. Your heart... that makes you to be one of His own... *or not* one of His own.

Beginning two weeks ago... continuing through last week and this week... and even next week... we’ve had excerpts of Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount” read for the day’s appointed Gospel reading. And as you probably noticed – especially in today’s reading – the essence of the 10 Commandments was repeated by Jesus

as He preached to the people then... and even now. In His sermon, Jesus was correcting the people's attitude toward the Commandments given to them by God through Moses.

You see, by this time, the people had expanded the Law of God into long, complicated lists of "do's" and "don'ts..." that, so they thought, if they followed these rules... then they believed that they would be considered righteous in God's eyes... as if they *really were* perfectly fulfilling the Commandments!

For example, God says in the Fifth Commandment: "**You shall not murder.**" Yet, Jesus knew their hearts, and He told them that when they willfully continued to hold their anger against someone else... or when they stubbornly refused to make peace with someone with whom they'd had a disagreement... even if they hadn't actually murdered someone... in God's eyes, they'd *still* have broken that Commandment.

And, God says in the Sixth Commandment: "**You shall not commit adultery.**" Yet, Jesus taught them that when they looked with lust at someone not their spouse... or when they divorced for reasons *other* than those permitted by God's Word... (adultery or malicious desertion)... then they were breaking *that* Commandment as well!

In reality, what Jesus warned them... *and us...* is that God's Commandments are nothing to be trifled with.

The people back then... as we all do to this day... we *all* look for our own special loophole that allows us to do what we wanna do... *regardless* of what the Word of God says.

The Jews of Jesus' time put into writing all manner of rules and regulations that they cooked up on their own... and they tried to convince themselves... that if they obeyed *those* rules... God would consider them to be righteous.

And... sadly... we're no different! We might not formally put our own set of rules into writing to justify our behavior, but we *do* have our own rules just the same!

Just like the people of old, we can justify the action that it's OK to talk trash about someone else. Just like the people of old, we think that we can steal a second look at that person who isn't our spouse... and let our imagination run wild.

The problem is, just like those who heard Jesus in person, we, too, have a "heart condition." Our hearts are far from pure and righteous; rather, they're conniving and scheming... always looking for an excuse to feed – and thus fulfill – its sinful nature and desire.

So... what are we to do?

Some people over the centuries have taken Jesus literally at His words and deliberately maimed themselves in a futile effort to rid themselves of their propensity to sin.

Sad as it is to say, some have literally torn out an eye... or cut off a hand... thinking that with one less eye or with only one hand, they *somehow* would no longer sin... and would then be righteous before the all-seeing, all-knowing Lord of the Universe.

But, of course, all man-invented methods of becoming righteous are doomed to failure. No one can become righteous by their own efforts.

So... *again*... what are we to do?

Stop! Stop making excuses... and repent! Admit to the Lord your God the awful, sordid, ugly truth. You *are* a sinner. Your heart is dirty and rotten and it's in desperate need of healing and hope. And then... dearly beloved of God... do this... feast your eyes *but this time*... feast them on the cross of Christ Jesus!

See... hanging on the cross... God's beloved Answer to your "heart condition."

See Jesus... true God and true man... who was lifted up to be punished and die for all your sins of thought, word, and action.

See Jesus... your Savior... whose blood covers all your sins so that you might stand before God on Judgment Day and be found as He desires you to be – holy and righteous.

Dear people of God, on this day before Valentine's Day, we see very clearly that sin is a "matter of the heart" that must be resolved... *in the heart!* Just as that sophomore boy's parents correctly advised him, so does God tell us that we must know what's in our heart... and act accordingly.

The true righteousness that God demands of us isn't to be found in outward actions. No! It's found in a repentant heart that has recognized its sin... and has seen... *and embraced* its Savior!

May our hearts ever yearn for that perfect righteousness found only in Christ Jesus... so that when our days on this earth are completed we may rest with Him forever! In His name and for His sake! [Amen.]

The peace of God that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. [Amen.]