

“The Good News about the Bad News”

Robert M. Thompson, Pastor

Corinth Reformed Church
150 Sixteenth Avenue NW
Hickory, North Carolina 28601
828.328.6196 corinthtoday.org

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There's such freedom in admitting that my heart is incurably deceitful.

Jeremiah 17:7-10

Ash Wednesday – March 6, 2019

(Corinth sermons are available in audio and print forms at corinthtoday.org/sermons.)

Primer on Lent

Because many of us grew up in churches that did not observe Lent and thought Ash Wednesday was something weird that Catholics did, let me explain.

The word “lent” really means “springtime,” and comes from the idea that the days lengthen this time of year. The date of Easter shifts each year. Why? It’s the first Sunday after the first full moon after the first day of spring. Got it?

For centuries the church has been observing 40 days of spiritual preparation for Easter that includes various kinds of personal and spiritual discipline. Good Friday and Easter are such special days that we won’t be ready for Holy Week unless we are intentional about it.

Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent, so whatever discipline or self-denial you choose, today is Day 1. Sundays are always the Lord’s Day, so most people who choose a Lent discipline like giving up chocolate will take a break on Sundays. Of course, if you choose a discipline like giving up lying for Lent, don’t make exceptions on Sundays.

Jeremiah’s lament

Jeremiah 17:9 is a cheery little verse, isn’t it? “The heart is deceitful above all things, and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” Jeremiah’s hardly a cheery little book. Jeremiah makes three points about the heart in this one verse.

First, it's tricky. That's a word I borrowed from Gollum in Lord of the Rings. The word in this verse is variously translated deceitful, fickle, devious. It's the same word at the root of the name Jacob, the one who grasps the heel, the deceiver.

The point in this verse isn't that your heart is always bad. It's that it's tricky. You can't trust it. Your heart will fool you. It's the root problem with today's focus on being who you are, letting your conscience be your guide. It's not trustworthy. Sometimes you feel guilty about something that wasn't your fault, and other times you don't feel guilty after you've done something very wrong. The heart is tricky.

Second, it's incurable. You can't fix it. Today you can have surgery to fix all kinds of physical problems your grandparents would either live with or die from – from laser eye surgery to knee replacement to liver transplants. Who would have thunk it?

There is no surgery to fix a tricky heart. Neither is there a pill to take to make it trustworthy. People try to eat or drink something that will make the heart feel better, but it's temporary and in any case doesn't fix the tricky part. If anything, the effect of drugs and alcohol make the heart even more confused about right and wrong.

Third, it's mysterious. Whether you're talking about falling in love or out of love, or wanting to do the right thing or not caring in the moment what happens, it's really something you can't analyze.

I've been using an Excel spreadsheet lately to track how long and how well I sleep, compared with factors like how much I eat or exercise, whether I take a nap during day or how much caffeine I consume. No spreadsheet will ever produce data on why it's sometimes really hard to love my neighbor, or to pray faithfully.

What do we do in Lent about the tricky, incurable, mysterious thing heart?

Good News x 2

The Bible is very much a bad news – good news book. That the Christian faith is a bad news – good news faith. We're created in the image of God, with infinite worth and value. But we're also all fallen, sinners by nature and by choice. God forgives us through Jesus Christ, but we still struggle with the sin nature. We have the promise of eternal life, but we all still die and grieve the death of our loved ones.

Jesus gives us a new heart, but he doesn't completely remove the old one, not in this life. The difference is that without Christ we don't have any choice but to sin. In Christ, we have the Holy Spirit who gives us the power to do the right thing.

Tonight I want to reframe the bad news as good news. The bad news is not only a setup for the good news. The bad news itself is good news.

Take, for example, those words one of your pastors will say when we apply ashes to your forehead: “You are dust and to dust you will return.” I have an app on my phone that reminds me five times a day, “Don’t forget, you’re going to die.” Not just on Ash Wednesday or during Lent, but five times every day all year long.

People seem to think that’s a depressing regular reminder. Not so for me. I think it’s good news. Death for the Christian is a transition to eternal life, to being with the Lord, to being free from this life’s pains and uncertainties and even from a tricky, incurable, mysterious heart. Like the *Heidelberg Catechism* says (Q. 42), death is a good thing because “it puts an end to our sinning.” I can’t wait.

Likewise, this idea of our depravity – our sin nature that even Christ does not fully remove when we are believers – there’s good news in that bad news. How is it good news that we have a tricky, incurable, mysterious heart?

Jeremiah 17:10 gives the good news. Verse 9 ends with a question, “Who can know it?” Verse 10 begins, “I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind.”

The good news is that my heart is known, and it’s known by the one who loves me best. Tim Keller says it this way:

“To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. But to be fully known and truly loved is, well, a lot like being loved by God. It is what we need more than anything.”

There’s such freedom in admitting that my heart is deceitful and beyond cure. There’s peace in admitting that. Who did I think I was fooling? “God, I don’t want to tell you about all those wicked thoughts, because I would be embarrassed for you to know about them.” He already knows. There’s terror in hiding sin, but when I admit it and still realize how loved I am, I’m free to accept forgiveness and grace that Jesus offers.

And one more thing. It’s such good news for my relationships with others when I admit I have a tricky, incurable, mysterious heart. I become easier to love as well. Rather than being surprised and disappointed and maybe angry when you let me down, I realize that you, too, have parts of your heart you can’t fix and maybe behavior patterns you can’t change. Rather than thinking you’re less than I am, by admitting my own deceitful heart I’m free to love you where you are and let God do the changing.

I think that’s really good news. Amen.