

I want to pick up this evening on a thought that's contained in the wonderful collect set for Ash Wednesday, which actually we'll be hearing every Sunday in Lent. The second sentence of the collect is this, "Create and make in us new and contrite hearts." I want this to be our prayer in this Lenten season. I want to suggest that this Lent, we give up giving up something for Lent and pursue instead gaining a new heart. The collect that we'll be hearing this Lent, it draws on several important bible verses. The bible has much to say about the heart and it has a meaning so much deeper than simply the organ that pumps blood around the body. It's more too than the seat of our emotions. In the biblical way of thinking, the heart is the source of all our intellectual, physical, emotional, and moral energies.

The heart is the seat of our desires. It's the center of our reason and perception. The heart determines who we are, our identity is located there. So when for example, in our reading from Joel, we hear the Lord say, "Return to me with all your heart." He's saying don't be halfhearted. Give me everything, give me all of you. Come to me and don't hold anything back. Similarly, in our gospel reading, when it ends with Jesus saying, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Jesus is saying, your sense of self, your identity, is revealed by where you invest your resources.

So to ask God to make in us a clean heart, a new and contrite heart, is not asking for a better circulatory system. It's asking to be made new, to be renewed at the very core of our being. This thought is present at various places in the Old Testament. David prays in Psalm 51 the verse that this collect draws on. "Create in me a clean heart, oh God, and put a new and right spirit within me." Jeremiah sees a day when God would make a new covenant with his people, which he will write on their hearts. In Ezekiel, we hear this promise from God, "A new heart I will give you and a new spirit I will put within you, I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh."

I want to suggest that it's these promises that we pursue this Lent. Think big. Eat all the chocolate you want, and seek instead a divine heart

transplant. Or at least have a spiritual stent put in. Notice that our collect asked God to create the new heart in us. We're not into self-improvement in the church, we're in the business of opening ourselves up to the transforming power of God's spirit in our lives. Paul says in Romans, "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."

It's that Holy Spirit that renews. We don't do it under our steam. Which isn't to say that we don't have a part to play in that transforming process. As I've mentioned before, I'm seeking to improve my golf game at the moment which shouldn't be too hard because I'm starting from a very, very low base, but anyway I give a coach a very large amount of money to give me a lesson. But I know that's not enough to get me to improve on its own. He gives me some tips and I have to go away to the range and practice. The coach can't do it all for me. So it is with our own spiritual development. We work with God's spirit in the process of renewal. It's God who does the creating, but we have to play our part. There are spiritual practices we can do to open ourselves up to God.

We might find that there are things to do each day that serve to play a part in the process of the renewal of our hearts. There are things we can do to develop a spiritual life, to develop and renew our hearts. For example, this Lent here at St. James, we are starting a five-week series in which we're looking at various spiritual practices that've been developed in the Christian tradition over the centuries. We're looking at those things which our forebears have found to be helpful spiritually. I'd like to encourage you to come on those Wednesday evenings, as together we pursue the goal of developing new and contrite hearts. That is a big and beautiful goal to aim for this Lent. It would mean that if someone asks us, "What have you given up for Lent?" You say, "Nothing. I haven't given anything up for Lent, but I've taken up heart surgery." That would cause a stir and it might lead to that process of deep spiritual renewal. That creation of a new and contrite heart. Amen.