

May I speak in the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I want to pick up and take as a text a phrase that appears in the Collect that we've just heard for Ash Wednesday. And actually it's a Collect that we'll hear every Sunday throughout Lent as our Lenten Collect. The second sentence says, "Create and make us new and contrite hearts." And of course, this is a phrase that's picked up from Psalm 51, which the choir sang for us, and that's a Psalm that's always said or sung on Ash Wednesday. And the version sung by the choir says this, "A clean heart create for me, oh God, and a steadfast spirit renew within me." And I want to suggest that we take that and adopt it as a theme for this Lent.

So rather than focusing on giving up something this Lent, instead we might pursue getting, gaining a new heart. And the text echoes many biblical verses. The Bible has much to say about the heart and it has a meaning so much deeper than simply the organ that pumps the blood around the body, and it's much 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. It's the seat of our desires. It's the center of our reason and perception. The heart, in short, determines who we are.

So, when in our reading from Joel, the Lord says, "Return to me with all your heart," God's saying, "Don't be half-hearted. Give me everything. Give me all of you. Come to me and don't hold anything back." Similarly, in our gospel reading ends with Jesus saying, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Jesus is saying, "Your very identity, your sense of self is revealed by where you put your resources." So, to ask God to make in us a clean heart, a new and contrite heart, it's not asking for a better circulatory system. It's asking to be made new, to be renewed at the very core of our being, and that thought is present throughout the scriptures.

Jeremiah sees a day when God would make a 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, and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." And I want to suggest that it's these promises, the promises of God renewing our heart, that we pursue this Lent. Think big, eat all the chocolate you want, and seek a divine heart transplant or at least a stent. Our goal isn't to get to Easter Day and think, "Great, now I can have a Twinkie." We want to get to Easter Day and be able to reflect on the renewal, the process that's gone on in our hearts, in our very being, in this holy season of Lent. And notice that our Lenten text is asking God to create a new heart in us.

It's God's work. We're not particularly into self-improvement in the church. We're in the business, instead, of opening ourselves up to God, the great heart surgeon, God, the one who can transform us and renew us by His spirit. Rather than looking to improve ourselves under our own steam, we seek to open ourselves up to God's spirit, the power of God to transform our lives. Paul says in the book of Romans, "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." It's God's spirit that renews, which isn't to say that we don't have a part to play in this process of renewal, in this process of transformation.

As some of you know, I'm seeking to improve my golf game, which shouldn't be too difficult because I'm starting from a very low base. But I pay a coach a ridiculous amount of money to give me a lesson, but I know that's not enough. There's nothing magical about me giving coach some money and my game of golf improving. It's up to me to work and to practice. The coach gives me some tips. He gives me some hints that I take onto the range. The coach can't do it all for me. So it is with our spiritual development, we work with God's Spirit in the process of renewal and we talk about spiritual practices. It's in the same spirit as practicing a golf swing. We talk of practices that help us open ourselves up to God, to invite the spirit in. And we might this Lent, find something we can do each day that will serve to allow God to renew and transform our hearts.

That's a question I'd like us all to consider this Ash Wednesday. What are we going to do to mark this holy season of Lent? What spiritual practice renews your heart? I'll tell you something that helps me, and I know it helps me because I did it last Lent and I'm going to do it again this Lent. It's beginning each day by looking at this little book by Sister Wendy Beckett, *The Art of Lent*, and each day she's got a picture there and a very brief reflection. And I found last Lent that that opened me up in a new way to God's spirit, and it's that little book which inspired the Lent course that begins next week on art and spirituality. And there's a few of the books available at the back for anyone who's interested.

There are lots of other things that you might try. Someone told me last year that in Lent, they made a particular point of watching all the sunsets that they could. And as they did that, they thanked God for the wonder of His creation and the beauty of His world. And as the sun dropped over the horizon, they also gave thanks for their loved ones who have died, for whom the setting sun was rising somewhere else. Let's all find a spiritual practice that renews our heart. It's a big, beautiful, bold goal for Lent. It would mean that if someone says to you in the next week or two, "Well, what have you given up for Lent?" You could say, "Nothing. I've taken up heart surgery." That would begin a conversation. It might provoke an interesting response, and it might lead to a process of deep spiritual renewal. Amen.