

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on August 29, 2021 (Proper 17, Year B)

When I was in sixth grade science class, the highlight — or lowlight, depending on your perspective — of the *entire* year was dissecting a fetal pig. The usually dour Mr. Knipp took great glee in teaching us to slice open the specimens, and he also had zero tolerance for squeamishness. I remember one classmate of mine turning green and, on his way out to the bathroom, being pelted by a spare eyeball, courtesy of Mr. Knipp. Such was the learning environment at an all-boys prep school in Baltimore in the early 1980's.

But what I most remember about the experience of dissecting that fetal pig, besides the sudden realization that I would *never* become a doctor, is that the heart was gross. Actually everything on the inside was gross. But in the back of my mind, I had high hopes for the heart. The heart is held up as the symbolic life force of every creature. But the heart of that fetal pig my partner and I were charged with dissecting wasn't even red. The heart was just another piece of foul-smelling gray goo.

In last week's sermon, Jack spoke about the word "believe," which in Latin is *credo*. Now, I realize that was a rather jarring transition, going from fetal pigs to Jack. But stay with me. Because as we dig a bit deeper into the Latin, *credo* derives from the word *corda*, meaning heart. Which is why, as Jack reminded us, to believe in something literally means, "to set your heart upon it." Jesus encourages us to set our hearts upon God. To give to God our trust, our devotion, and our love.

This morning we get a bit more heart talk. Though, at first glance, this passage comes across as a bit of a rant. Jesus is basically responding to an accusation that he is an uncouth heretic. Someone who neither follows nor encourages his disciples to follow the traditions of the faith, or at least the ones deemed important by his accusers. What kind of religious teacher, they want to know, doesn't even follow the basic teachings around ritual and purity? Like washing hands and dishes and saying the appropriate prayers that accompany these actions. Though, just to be clear, Jews of this era held a variety of beliefs and there was no uniformity of practice. So the group of scribes and Pharisees questioning Jesus were hardly representative of the wide diversity of faith and practice among first century Jews.

But what Jesus is doing here is reframing the entire narrative. He's bringing some much needed perspective, even renewal, to this whole business of religion. He likens the "traditions of the elders" to mere "human precepts" that miss the point of God's deepest desires and commandments. And that's pretty radical! It's basically the verbal equivalent of flipping over tables to make a broader point.

We spend so much time on external things, whether that's words we say with our lips or actions we perform with our bodies, that we often neglect what really matters. And it's comforting, kind of, to realize that the same issues we wrestle with today also dogged humanity 2,000 years ago. We still spend way too much time focused on the externals of our faith and not nearly enough time living our faith and focusing on love, justice, compassion, and peace. It's so much easier to get angry about small, insignificant things in our lives, whether at home or at work or at church, than it is to rail against the bigger issues of injustice in our world.

And in the end, it all gets back to the heart. The heart can be the source of all the things that matter. But the heart can also be the source of evil. We see this in that long, but hardly comprehensive, list of evil intentions that come from the human heart. Jesus ticks them off: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, and folly. Contrast that with the list of what is known as the fruit of the Spirit from Paul's letter to the Galatians: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Both of these lists highlight intentions that are embedded within the human heart. As human beings, we are capable of both great good and great evil. That's just part of the human condition.

But Jesus invites us to side with the good. To focus on the spiritual practices that move the human heart into greater alignment with God. We can't always do this, of course. Again, we're human. But we can turn again and again to the merciful God who loves us and lifts us up and encourages us and seeks after us.

Yesterday afternoon we had a few baptisms in the Memorial Garden. One of the things I so miss during this pandemic is holding baptisms in the context of Sunday morning worship — where they really belong. We're just not there yet. But the baptismal rite reminds us that there is a choice between good and evil that is held out to us through relationship with Jesus Christ. Those three renunciations and three affirmations asked of the parents and godparents highlight this choice. They're asked whether they renounce satan, the evil powers of this world, and all sinful desires — basically everything that draws us away from the love of God. While then affirming Jesus as savior and promising to trust, follow, and obey him.

It's stark language, especially when you're staring at a cute infant cooing in your arms. But it speaks to the human condition and what exists in the human heart. So every time someone is baptized, we're in effect holding up those two lists. The one with all the bad stuff and the one with all the good fruit. Both of those lists are deeply embedded within us. But following Jesus evokes the fruit of the Spirit in the human heart, and invites us to set our heart upon God.

One final bit of Latin. The start of the Eucharistic Prayer is known as the *sursum corda*. That's the part where the priest, standing at the altar in front of the soon-to-be consecrated bread and wine, opens his or her hands in prayer and says "Lift up your hearts." The Latin is literally translated as "up hearts" — *sursum corda*. We are invited, commanded even, to lift up our hearts. And not just to lift them randomly but, as the people's response makes clear, to lift them up to the Lord.

That's what Jesus desires for us and what he gets so passionate about. He encourages us to take all the human traditions in our faith lives, as deeply held and beloved as they may be, with a grain of salt. At their best, the traditions of our faith point to God and assist in the lifting up of our hearts to God. But they themselves are not God. This building is not God. Liturgy is not God. Sacred music is not God. The Bible is not God. They all point to God in profoundly moving and important ways, yes. But lifting up our hearts to God — through prayer and thanksgiving, through acts of charity and compassion — that's what matters. And it all begins with the heart.