A Tale of Two Hearts

In Charles Dickens’ novel *A Tale of Two Cities*, a young French aristocrat was condemned to die by the guillotine during the bloody French Revolution. His punishment was based solely on his forefathers’ crimes against the peasantry.

An hour before his execution, he was visited in his cell by a young English friend who could have passed for his twin. The visitor overcame the doomed man with an anesthetic and exchanged clothes with him. He took the aristocrat’s place and was marched to the guillotine. Before his execution, he remembered the words of Christ, “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”

This man’s love for his friend was great. But there is a greater love, isn’t there? Jesus died not only for his friends but also for his enemies -- for those who hated him, for those who mocked him, and, looking ahead to our day, even for the members of ISIS. That’s love, isn’t it?

The Human Heart

Over 30 years ago, when I was in the seminary, the suggested reading list included a book by Bo Giertz entitled *The Hammer of God*. It’s a novel based on the lives of pastors in the Church of Sweden. Although the Swedish Church is officially Lutheran, this novel makes it clear that it Lutheran in name only.

Pastor James Batchelor summarizes one of the lengthy conversations in the book. It’s a conversation about the human heart. It seems that a young vicar named Fridfeldt tries to explain to his old, supervising pastor how he knows that he is a saved.

Finally, the old pastor says, “So you are a believer, I'm glad to hear that. What do you believe in?” “In Jesus of course,” answered Fridfeldt, “I mean – I mean that I have given Him my heart.” The older man’s face became suddenly as solemn as the grave. And he said, “Do you consider *that* something to give Him?” … The heart is a rusty old can on a junk heap. A fine … gift, indeed!”

Apparently, the old pastor was familiar with today’s Gospel reading where Jesus speaks of the human heart, “For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride,
foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

Today, one of the most common pieces of advice is “follow your heart.” And see where that has led us. Adultery and sexual immorality are pervasive in our culture. Marriage has become old-fashioned. Why marry when you can cohabitate and have “friends with benefits.” And I can’t remember a nightly newscast that doesn’t report a theft, violence, or murder.

Since 1973, Americans have legally murdered over 54 million unborn babies. They were killed before they drew their first breath. Our culture says “Follow your heart.” And we have. We have killed nine times as many human beings as Hitler killed in the Holocaust.

And more recently, we have followed our hearts and, contrary to Scripture, our nation has legalized gay marriage.

We live in a culture where our values are shaped less and less by God’s Word and more and more by what we see and hear on TV and the Internet. Entertainment today is laced with lusty doses of highly sexualized talk and video.

For good measure, they fill their stories with emotionally charged scenes of violence, and with tear-jerking, make-believe romances, where the message is, “You know, you’ll never be happy unless you follow your heart. And we fall for it! Even we Christians fall for it!

Follow your heart? Come on, now! Don’t you remember the words of Jeremiah who said,

“The heart is deceitful above all things, and
desperately wicked; who can understand it?”

Don’t you know that the worst advice you can give to some people is “be yourself?”

We are not, by nature, basically good with a little bit of evil in us, but rather that we are altogether evil with not one bit of good in us. Total depravity, though offensive to the self-righteous, is entirely Biblical. Why don’t we feel as wicked as the Bible says we are? For the same reason that a fish doesn’t feel wet--because it’s immersed in it!

I don’t like this truth. It means that when I want to do what feels right, I have to distrust myself. Jesus says that my heart is a source of evil, not good.

- Jesus says that I can’t trust my heart in matters of good and bad.
- I can’t trust my heart in matters of truth and error.
- I can’t trust my heart in matters of right and wrong.

It is terrifying that my Savior tells me that I carry the seeds of my own destruction around inside my evil heart. Yes, my own heart betrays me.

Do you remember King David? He followed his heart’s desire, didn’t he? He committed adultery with Bathsheba and murdered her husband Uriah. Then the prophet Nathan confronted him. Nathan said to him, “You stole Uriah’s wife! You slept with her! You lied to Uriah! You
murdered him! You lied to your people! You lied to God! You mocked God!

Caught in his lies, David cries out in repentance to the LORD …

“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from Thy presence; and take not Thy Holy Spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation; and uphold me with Thy free spirit.”

(Psalm 51:10-12, KJV).

And God washes David’s heart and makes it clean. Like David, you and I were born dead. We were born dead in our trespasses and sins. Our hearts were as black as night and as grimy as sewer sludge.

**Christ’s Heart**

But over and over again we read about God’s love for sinners. In words that we know well, the prophet Joel says,

“Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.”

(Joel 2:13, ESV)

So he determined to save us through his only-begotten Son. The Holy Spirit was his Father and the Virgin Mary was his mother. He was born with a clean heart.

In my tale of two hearts, ours were black with sin and his was white as snow. The thing about Jesus is that he seeks us. In our world, the good guys seek the bad guys (murderers, rapists, and evil people) to lock them up or to put them to death. But Jesus seeks the bad guys. He wants to take their evil, black hearts and give them his clean, pure, white heart.

But it’s not going to be a simple matter. I mean, how do you exchange hearts? I know how to exchange clothing and tools. But hearts? It’s going to take more than going to the O.R. and having a heart transplant. In fact, this exchange is going to take death.

The cross means death to the sinless one and life to sinners. This surgery is going to hurt Jesus. In truth, it’s going to kill him. On the cross the heavenly Father will make the great exchange. Behold the transaction: The Almighty takes the sins of the world and charges them to Christ’s account. At the same time he takes Christ’s righteousness and charges it to our accounts. In this exchange, Christ is punished unto death; and we sinners are given Christ’s life and righteousness.

Has love ever suffered so great a cost? Has it ever loved so unworthy a creature? Has it ever spared so ungrateful a mortal? We are all alike, you and me. But love has never reached so high or stooped so low?

His love for us is greater than our love for wickedness, greater than our love for things
material, and even greater than our love for ourselves. And, yet, the Savior suffers all, endures all, and pays all. And for one reason: We are his treasure! Mere nails, though pounded deep, were not enough to keep Jesus on the cross. But love was. And love prevailed. Don’t you see: He would rather suffer hell for us than to go to heaven without us!

The Gospel is the only story where the hero dies for the villain. In Christ we have clean hearts. But our old, evil ones still cling to us.

So we Christians have, in a manner of speaking, split personalities. The old heart urges us to sin; our new one wants to obey Christ. So, like the saints before us, we fight the good fight of faith.

Let us ever put down the old Adam and bring forth the new man in Christ. Let us bring forth Christian love: love for our fellow Christians, love for those who slander us, love for those who hate us, even love for those who want to kill us.

Let us resolve to do this lest we die in our sloth! Let us resolve to make a difference where God has planted us.

In the name of Jesus: Υιοθεον.

Soli Deo Gloria!

Endnotes

1See John 15:13.
4Jeremiah 17:9.
5In Ephesians 2:1-3, St. Paul writes, And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the
sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” (ESV). Emphasis mine.

6In 2 Corinthians, St. Paul says, “For [God] made Him [Christ] who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Corinthians 5:21, NKJV).