

A Shiny, Salty Heart

by Linda Rex

February 5, 2023, 5th Sunday in Epiphany—The two courses I am currently taking with Grace Communion Seminary are both related to the practice of ministry. The practice of ministry involves taking what I believe and applying it to what I do in my everyday life and activities in caring for others. For many people, practice of ministry comes instinctively and naturally because they are gifted and designed in that way, while for me it is a real challenge and requires intentionality and discipline, and a whole lot of the Spirit of God.

In the New Testament passage for today, 1 Corinthians 2:1-12, the apostle Paul tells his readers he didn't come to them in superiority of speech or wisdom when he preached the gospel to them. If anything, he was weak and fearful, speaking solely what the Spirit gave him, rather than using rhetorical skills and persuasion. His point was that he wanted their faith to rest on something other than his ability to present the gospel in intriguing and captivating ways—he wanted it to rest on the power of God rather than the wisdom of men.

When it comes to the presentation of the good news, what do we rest on? A lot of times we get focused on the presentation itself, or on knowing the right information, or on being able to prove or explain what we believe to be true. The focus becomes ourselves, our own abilities (or lack thereof), and our effectiveness. In reality, it isn't be about any of these things. Yes, I suppose it would be helpful to learn more or be more adept at expressing ourselves or demonstrating God's love, but when it all comes down to what really matters, it comes down to Jesus Christ in us by the Holy Spirit.

What Paul had that was so persuasive to his hearers was the indwelling Holy Spirit, filling him and pouring out from him through his words and actions. This mystery, of Christ in us, was predestined by God, for he always intended us to live in oneness with him through his Son in the Spirit. Our ability to comprehend the things of God comes from God himself—the Spirit living in us and through us, simply because Jesus lived a truly human life, died a truly human death, and rose from the grave, bringing our human flesh home to Father in the Spirit.

What might this mean for us, then, as we live our everyday lives? Too often we live as orphans, believing it is all up to us. We live in our own strength, according to our own agenda and our own plans. When the world does not function according to our expectations, we become angry, frustrated, and/or depressed. What may not occur to us is that our rage against God and how he is running his world may look a lot like the rage which drove Saul to arrest and imprison the followers of Christ, believing they were unholy heretics which needed to be stopped.

What did it take for Saul to make the about-face transition to being a follower of Jesus Christ, the powerful advocate for the gospel, the apostle Paul? It took a personal encounter with our living Lord, Jesus Christ. It took the powerful healing and transformational work of the Holy Spirit. It took something, or Someone, beyond his physical self to bring about such a radical change. It took God himself, working in Saul/Paul's life to move him from persecuting those who believed the gospel into believing and preaching it himself.

One of the phrases I often hear in modern literature and media is “you need to follow your heart.” Whenever I hear that, I often hear echoing in my mind what I was told as a child, a scripture I had to memorize, which said, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?” (Jer. 17:9 KJV) Sadly, what I didn't pay attention to in all those years is the context of that passage and what the entire Bible said about the human heart.

Before this, in verse 5, the prophet writes, “Thus says the Lord, ‘Cursed is the man who trusts in mankind and makes flesh his strength, and whose heart turns away from the Lord.’” In verse 10 it says, “I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give to each man according to his ways,

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according to the results of his deeds.” Then, in verse 14, Jeremiah says, “Heal me, O Lord, and I will be healed; save me and I will be saved, ...” On the one hand, the prophet was talking about how wonderful it was when a person followed God, but on the other, he reminds his readers that going down a different path will end in destruction, and then states that we cannot be healed or saved unless God does the healing and saving.

Do you see how we can believe something about ourselves which isn’t really true and end up in a totally wrong place? What we forget is that God did not create us with a wicked, deceitful heart. God created our human flesh with a heart designed to love him and love others in a warm fellowship of other-centered love. God did not lose his desire for us to share in that relationship simply because we turned away from him. He began to work in human events and circumstances to bring about, in spite of our surrender to evil, sin, and death, what he always intended. What Jeremiah predicted in Jeremiah 31:31-34 was that God would give us a new covenant, writing his law on human hearts and minds. In other words, this heart which is “deceitful” and “desperately wicked” is not the truth about each of us. God knows our hearts and minds, and, in Christ, did what was necessary to heal and save us in his incarnation, crucifixion, and ascension, and in the giving of his Spirit. Jesus became a curse for us that we might be included in his own right relationship with God.

Jesus told his disciples they were the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matthew 5:13–20). They were not salt and light by their own efforts, but because of who he was—the Light of the world, the Creator of salt and the earth, present with them. It is his life in us by the Spirit who shines brightly in a dark world, adding flavor and zest to our mundane human existence and frantic struggles to survive. Notice that Jesus did not say in this particular place that we needed to find some way to make ourselves a light source. He simply said to put ourselves as a light in a place where we will shine brightly and provide illumination to a specific area. He quite clearly said we can’t make salt salty—but we can be the salt we are as God’s presence and power at work in and through us by the Spirit in a place which needs spiritual flavor.

God has given us Christ in the Spirit, living his life in and through us, in a dark world which desperately needs light and could really use some heavenly flavor. He has given us Jesus’ heart and mind by the Spirit. How do we express his heart and mind in and through our everyday lives as we walk and talk on this planet Earth? All of life is a participation in Christ’s life by the Spirit. Jesus told us he was in the Father, we are in Christ, and Christ is in us. That means our everyday life is Spirit-infused as we trust in Christ and walk hand-in-hand with Father through each situation and circumstance we face. This is the meaning of eternal life—and we participate in it right now, in this moment, through Jesus and by the Spirit who lives in us.

*Thank you, Father, for giving us your heart and mind through Jesus in the Spirit.
Grant us the grace to shine with your light, to salt this earth with the heavenly flavor
of your eternal life of love and unity in this tasteless human existence. Amen.*

“And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God. Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; but we speak God’s wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory; the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory; but just as it is written, ‘things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and’ which ‘have not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love Him.’ For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God,” 1 Corinthians 2:1–12 NASB

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