

‘LIFT HIM UP!’
Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 51:1-17; John 12:20-33
Dr. Charles D. Yoost, Senior Pastor

Most of us are aware that the two most challenging diseases we face in our modern world are cancer and heart disease. We are indeed fortunate to be living in a place where there is world-class treatment for both. More than one person has quipped, “If you are going to get sick, Cleveland is a pretty good place to be!” Indeed, people come here from all over the world to benefit from our health care and medical facilities.

Did it catch your attention that today’s Scriptures are about heart trouble? That’s right. According to the prophet Jeremiah, the people of God suffer from heart problems. He says they have sometimes managed to keep the rules, but their hearts are not in it. Now we know that in the Bible, the word “heart” does not mean the soft muscle that pulses at the center of our bodies. Instead, the “heart” is the strong spiritual center that integrates our feeling, knowing and experiencing into a self that is known fully only to God. When Jeremiah talks about heart problems, he is not talking about the kind of problems that require medication and by-pass surgery, but rather spiritual problems caused by the way we live our lives.

And so we turn, not to the cardiologist, but to the Source of our being, and we realize, along with the Psalmist, that our hearts are not what they should be. The Psalmist cries out for mercy, knowing that he has sinned against God and his fellow human beings. Tradition holds that this psalm was written by David after his affair with Bathsheba. We may not have committed adultery as David did, but we, too, have sinned. All of us have fallen short of the potential that God has given us.

We may have regrets about our past, and about the current state of our relationships with others, but our issue is really with God. “*Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight,*” observes the Psalmist. Because we have offended God, only with God’s help can we address the heart problems we have created for ourselves and others. The Psalmist asks for mercy, “*Create in me a clean heart, O God,*” he asks, “*And put a new and right spirit within me.*”

The prophet Jeremiah clarifies what the Psalmist is pleading for — fleshing out the newness of a clean heart and a right spirit. A new heart means God’s covenant translated from rules into relationships. No longer are the rules written on tablets of stone; they are written in the soft tissue of human potential. God will make a new covenant with his people, not like the one that is restrictive and broken like a New Year’s resolution, but one that is enduring and life-giving.

This new covenant is personified in Jesus. The coming of Jesus reveals God’s heart to us. The coming of Jesus shows the extent to which God will go for us. It demonstrates God’s

unquenchable desire for us. The story of Jesus is the story of a God who will stop at nothing to get to us — even death on a cross.

It has been said, and I love these words,

“If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it.

If God had a wallet, your photo would be in it.

God sends you flowers every spring,

and a sunrise every morning.

When you want to talk, God will listen

God could live anywhere in the universe,

And God chose your heart!

And that Christmas gift God sent you in Bethlehem?

Face it my friend, God’s crazy about you!”

For those of us with heart trouble, the answer to our problems is Jesus, who demonstrates God love for us.

In the Gospel lesson, some strangers come to Galilee wishing to see Jesus. We assume that they are coming as seekers for a better way of life, not a group of people looking to meet a celebrity, for Jesus immediately engages them in a theological conversation. *“When I am lifted up from the earth,”* Jesus says, *“I will draw all people to myself.”* These words have a double meaning. Jesus will be lifted up on the cross for all to see. As Jesus is “lifted up” on the cross, he is being lifted up but not away from us, rather he is lifted even closer toward us. As he is lifted up, he is moving into the heart of our violence, our cruelty, and our hatred. When he is lifted up, people will be attracted to Jesus like a magnet, for his way of life intuitively makes sense. People are drawn to him, for he radiates caring, concern and love. This really is his true hour of glory. *“When I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself.”*

When John’s Gospel talks about Jesus being glorified on the cross, he is emphasizing that Jesus is fulfilling his redemptive purpose for the world. But make no mistake about it, crucifixion means death. When Jesus is lifted up, he is lifted up to die.

His sacrificial death challenges all that the world normally associates with life. The world says, *“Accumulate in order to be safe and secure.”* Jesus says, *“Give, sacrifice and ground your life in relationships with God and people, not things.”* The world says, *“Violence is the normative way to solve problems, from the schoolyard to the world stage.”* Jesus says, *“Love, give, sacrifice, forgive.”* The world says, *“Entertainment and diversion are the paths to pleasure.”* Jesus says, *“Commitment and service are the paths to joy.”* The world says, *“Power is the way.”* Jesus says, *“Service is the way.”*

“Die to the earthly ways of the world,” says Jesus. *“Come with me and you will touch and taste eternal life even now, even before your death.”* That’s the new life that we seek. That’s the new heart the Psalmist prayed for and the prophet Jeremiah promised: the heart of Christ loving us and giving us a new lease on life.

God is calling us to be changed people with new hearts and new lives. We become changed people by making use of the means of grace that God has given us. By gazing into the mirror of Scripture, by taking part in the community life of God’s people, by daily reflection and prayer — we grow in faith. It’s not so much that prayer and Bible study and participation in church will change us, but rather that those things will open the door for God to change us. Every time we open the Bible, sit with God in a quiet place, or strengthen our ties to the body of

Christ, we are putting the pen in God's hand and saying, "Here is my heart. Write on it what you will." When we begin by letting God change our hearts, sooner or later, everything else will change, too.

For those of us with heart problems, God offers a solution. It is the new heart and life personified in the life of Jesus. **Lift him up.** Lift him up for all to see. He is the solution to all the problems we have in life. St. Augustine was right when he said that God has created us for himself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in God. Lift Jesus up. Make him the center of your life today. In all that you say and all that you do, **lift him up.** Lift up his way of life. For when he is lifted up, he will reveal God's power and God's love to all people. **Lift him up. Lift him up today.**

Prayer: Dear God, As Jesus was lifted up on the cross at Calvary, so help us to lift him up this day in every aspect of our lives that the world might see him, be drawn to him, and be transformed by the power of his never-failing love. We pray in his name. Amen.