

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

A young rabbi went to serve his first synagogue. He noticed that on the first Sabbath, when he said the prayers, the congregation on the left side stood at the beginning of the prayers, and the congregation on the right side remained seated. He thought this was a little odd, but continued to say the prayers. After the first couple of petitions, he noticed a murmuring, which intensified as he continued the prayers. Finally, it got loud enough and he was able to make out some of the words.

It was a disagreement between the two halves of the congregation; the left half was saying that in this synagogue the tradition was that the congregation stood during the prayers, and the right half was saying that in this congregation the tradition was that they sat during the prayers. As the prayers continued, the voices got louder, until finally the rabbi stopped because he was sure that God was the only one who could hear him.

Hoping that this event was due to having a new rabbi (and attempting to influence him), the young rabbi did not discuss it with anyone, but the next Sabbath it happened again. The argument once again got so loud that the young rabbi stopped before he had finished his prayers. People were actually yelling at each other. The tone had gotten vicious, and each side of the congregation started to engage in accusations of heresy and other name-calling.

The young rabbi went to the elderly rabbi who had served this congregation for years, and told him what was going on. The question he asked at the end of his story was, "So is it the tradition of the congregation to stand during the prayers?" The older rabbi stroked his beard and replied, "No, that has never been the tradition of that congregation." "So the tradition is that they remain sitting during the prayers?" The older rabbi looked off into the distance, and said, "No, that was never the tradition of that congregation either." The young rabbi threw his hands in the air in exasperation, and said, "There must be some solution to this! The way things are now, they just end up screaming at each other during the prayers." The old rabbi's face lit up in a smile as he lifted an admonishing finger to the sky and said, "Yes! That was our tradition!"

In my preparations for this message, I had noted some preachers reflected on the issues of change arising from these readings. How some churches almost go to war over the color of the paint in the sanctuary, or the new carpet, or some other changes of detail that really are sideshows to the REAL conflicts that exist in some form or another of dysfunction or distress. Those issues are sideshows to the real focus of Jesus in these readings.

God is more concerned with who we are on the inside than the outward ceremonies we observe. We can pray standing up or we can pray sitting down, and still never really pray. We can wash our hands a thousand times and still have unclean hearts. We can sing every song in all three

of our hymnals, and still not know God. We can kneel and worship on red carpet all our lives, and never really experience holy ground. We can take bread and the cup after the sermon every time and still never commune with God.

It is not the outward form of the tradition that matters, but what lies in our hearts that counts.

God wants to do a new thing today, and we need to be open to it. What worked yesterday may not have power for today. We live in a new day with new challenges, and we need to hear the word of the Lord for today.

Jesus told us that it was impossible to put new wine into old wineskins because the old wineskins are already stretched and brittle, and the new wine expands and causes them to break. The old wineskins represent the structures we get into, the outward traditions that have forgotten the heart. The new wine is the new work that God is doing in us.

The Jews were trying to get Jesus to conform to ceremonial laws. But Jesus knew the new wine had to have room to expand. When we look at the early church, we see that they changed with God moving in their midst. They were not bound to the past, but were living in the glorious now of God.

He calls together the crowd around him so they can hear the warning, in effect: "Purity is not a matter of keeping external rules, without regard for what is inside you. Righteousness is not simply how you behave when people are watching. Just as you have an inner aspect as well as an outer one, even so, keeping rules is not what it is about. You must pay attention to the condition of your heart!"

Jesus wants us to have a heart condition!

Not the muscle in our chest that pumps blood...and not the emotional, Valentine's Day heart either. But, Jesus understands the heart in the Hebrew sense as the center or core of the person, the inner self.

Our hearts are full. All too often, full of the poisons that kill our spirits and the spirits of people around us. Jesus lists these poisons, but the list is not exhaustive. Quite simply and generally, our words and our actions...as well as our silence and our inaction...either are blessings or curses. We say that God blesses us...but do we bless God in return? In the cosmic whole, we either advance God's creation by what we do or say...or we do not. We either bless God...and ourselves...with what we do or say....or we do not. Even in this consumer society that bombards us with messages about how we can buy this or that to solve our problems, we cannot solve this one. What we need is to empty and detoxify our hearts from the poisons flooding forth from it. The problem is not external, and neither is the solution.

What we require, at the center of our being, is for God to create a new heart....which happens over time and continually. Over and over again, the fullness of the poison in our hearts must be emptied so that the transforming grace of Christ can find a home in us. We have to become like

children, open to the wonder at the miracles around and within us.

As Christians, we cannot let the sideshows take center stage....which means that we have to continually challenge ourselves...always turning to the basics of discipleship. These include the faith of the ancient creeds and the demands of the baptismal covenant, as well as the Great Commission's insistence that we allow God to make disciples, baptize, teach, and recognize the presence of Christ among us. We do well to measure our lives, as persons and communities, by nothing less than the expansive standard of the Great Commandment that we love God with all of our being and love our neighbors...all of them...as we love ourselves. Our discipleship needs to be characterized by nothing less than wonder, love, and praise.

The story is told of an old man who said, "When I was young, I wanted to change the world. I found I could not do that, so I tried to change my community. I found I could not do that, so I tried to change my family. I found I could not do that, so I decided to let God change me."

And that, in the whole of it all, is enough....in the loving and blessed name of God, revealed to us as the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.