

Exaudi (Seventh Sunday of Easter): May 24, 2020
“Replacing a Stone Heart”

Alleluia! Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

It was almost one year ago that I remember sitting in the waiting room in St. Cloud, Minnesota. My father was having heart surgery, and of all the texts I read that day, interestingly enough, one of them was the Old Testament text today. Today is Exaudi Sunday. It is a word that means hearing and understanding. With all of the terminology and medical language spoken during highly emotional times, such as surgery involving the heart, the doctors do a good job of breaking things down and explaining things simply.

For our hearing and clear understanding, God uses Ezekiel to describe a surgery on the heart of His people, not just the heart, but the entire being. Hear again these words from God through the Prophet Ezekiel, ***“I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. So, I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my Spirit within you, and I will make it so in my statutes you will walk, and my judgments you will guard and you will do.”***¹

The understanding of these verses seems clear to most Christians; what many forget is this is the necessary conclusion God’s judgment, which the lectionary does not include, but it important to get the full scope of what is happening. Beginning in verse 16 we hear Ezekiel say, ***“The word of the Lord came to me: Son of man, when the house of Israel lived in their own land, they defiled it by their ways and their deeds. Their ways before me were like the uncleanness of a woman in her menstrual impurity. So I poured out my wrath upon them for the blood that they had shed in the land, for the idols with which they had defiled it. I scattered them among the nations, and they were dispersed through the countries. In accordance with their ways and their deeds I judged them. But when they came to the nations, wherever they came, they profaned my holy name, in that people said of them, ‘These are the people of the Lord, and yet they had to go out of his land.’ But I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations to which they came.”***²

¹ Ezekiel 36:25-27, my translation

² Ezekiel 36:16-21

Hearts of stone profane God's name. In the very First Petition of the Lord's Prayer we pray, "Hallowed be Thy name. *What does this mean?* God's name is certainly holy in itself, but we pray in this petition that it may be kept holy among us also. *How is God's name kept holy?* God's name is kept holy when the Word of God is taught in its truth and purity, and we, as the children of God, also lead holy lives according to it. Help us to do this, dear Father in heaven! But anyone who teaches or lives contrary to God's Word profanes the name of God among us. Protect us from this, heavenly Father!"³

Teaching and living any way that is against the word of God shows the heart of stone within us all. I cannot count how many times I have heard, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" Honestly, the true response to that is only, "Because there are no good people." If we believe God's Word in Genesis 3, 5, and 7, then of course in many other places, not least of which is Psalm 51, we can only really ask, "Why does good things happen to any of us at all?"

How can a heart of stone become a heart of flesh? How can a person become good? How can a sinner become a saint? The heart is an important muscle and if you eat right and exercise and take the right medications the heart can continue to beat properly for a very long time.

How does this translate to the rest of the body? If you tell a sinner to simply stop and start doing good, will that make them good? Sin is not just something that oppresses people and can be removed with a bit of therapy, proper food or medication. Sin corrupts us to the very core, thus a change must be done in the very core, the heart, soul, and mind. True obedience to God requires a heart that fears, loves, and trusts in God above all things, at all times, in all places.

Everyone needs a change of heart because everyone is sinful and unclean. All mankind sings, "***Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.***"⁴ The history of the world is proof of this. It is easy to recognize the sinfulness of those who did not believe in the One, True God. What about those who were in God's chosen people? The history of Israel is a history of rebellion against God, divine punishment, repentance, restoration and then rebellion again.

³ Luther's Small Catechism, First Petition of the Lord's Prayer

⁴ Psalm 51:5

God's people would live in peace for a time, which showed their true hearts of stone. They would live how they wanted. They would forget God, or worse, twist God's Word to say whatever they wanted to believe. God would repeatedly call them to repentance. He would forgive them their sins and reclaim them as His own. They would repent and then quickly fall into the same cycle over and over again.

God would use the foreign nations around Israel to carry out some of the harshest judgments upon His people. When, in their stone hearts, they insisted on worshiping the gods of stone, the false gods, around them, God's justice decreed that they should be taken over by the nations. Remember, this is where Israel is during the time of Ezekiel's ministry. Israel was just conquered by a foreign people, they were sitting in exile due to the strong hand of Babylon.

During this time of exile, they needed to again hear and understand God. So, God sent prophets, like Ezekiel, to comfort them with the promise of future deliverance. According to God's promise, they would be restored to their own land. More than that, God was going to perform great acts of mercy—sprinkle them with water and clean them from idols, remove their hearts of stone replacing them with hearts of living flesh, even God's Spirit will be placed within them, so they would live as God's Redeemed children.

What happens after Israel returns to their land after the exile? They forgot God. They fell into sin, and the pattern continued. Why? They liked it. That's why they continued to do it. On this side of heaven, the sinful flesh still remains, and so the sinful flesh goes for what is easiest and most pleasurable to the sinful flesh.

Do we not do the same? It's not that complicated. We like to sin, and so we do it. It is easier to get angry and yell about unfairness than it is to actually listen and respond calmly. It is easier to not read God's Word. It is easier to not sing hymns. It is easier to not pray. It is easier to not love my neighbor like I love myself. Just as it is easier to not listen to the doctor, take my medication, do the exercises, and stop eating and drinking those things that are detrimental to my health; so also, it is easier to not listen to God's Word, especially if spoken by a sinful man, to not live in love, and to not take the medicine of immortality.

In many ways, the task set before the Pastor in the Office of the Ministry is very simple—speak God's Word in its truth and purity; don't add anything and don't take anything away; and administer the Sacraments according to Christ's institution.

So, it's not very complicated. People do what they like to do. If you want to change what people do you must change what they like; so, how is this done? There are a couple of options. You can simply give commands. People respond to threats and bribes, but that's not true obedience. You can force people to comply, but that doesn't change the heart. If someone wants to change, they have to want to change.

But how does that work for sinners, of whom God says, "***The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot.***"⁵ Not only can we not do it ourselves, but on our own, we don't want to. It is all a work of God Himself. How does God do it, the same way He did for Israel—the "***washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.***"⁶ Through His appointed means, your heart of stone is removed and you are given a heart of living flesh and His Spirit is placed within you.

There are two theological terms we must keep straight: justification and sanctification. These two words get jumbled by many. The sin likes to forget God, and place more emphasis on ourselves, so it is easy to mix them; but mixing them is just as poisonous as doctor prescribed medications with self-medications. Very simply, here's the difference. First, God justifies you, then God sanctifies you. God does not justify you by sanctifying you. He sanctifies you by justifying you. Clear? Let me explain.

To justify means to declare someone to be righteous. It is to say that the person is righteous. What God says is so because God says it. God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. Jesus said: "Young man I say to you, Arise!" and the dead man became alive again. Jesus says of the bread and the wine in the Lord's Supper: "This is my body...this is My blood;" and that's what it is. Why? God speaks and it is so.

God said, "***I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.***"⁷ And so it is. God sprinkles water over our heads. He baptizes us into His holy Name. This is a washing away of sin. Holy Baptism cleanses you from your idols. It gives you a new heart and His Holy Spirit.

⁵ Romans 8:7

⁶ Titus 3:5

⁷ Ezekiel 36:25

With this new heart, your ears are opened to hear His Word with faith. With this new heart, your mouth is opened to receive the body and blood of Christ, and by faith receive forgiveness from all your sins. Baptism, Absolution, the Lord's Supper, all speak forgiveness to you. The forgiveness is complete in every way. As Jesus suffered for all the sins of all the sinners of all time, the forgiveness that God gives us in the gospel and sacraments of Christ is complete. It is perfect. It lacks nothing.

This is justification. God reckons to us the righteousness of Christ. He credits to us the obedience of Jesus who suffered and died for us on the cross. In short, He forgives us all our sins. This means that we are righteous. We are just. God justifies us. Our hearts of stone were hung around the neck of Jesus as He hurled Himself in the wrath of God's punishment against sin.

On our own, we are sinners; but God's word says we are saints. Within us there is stone hearts with evil inclinations and wicked pleasures; yet, ***“while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.”***⁸

It is Jesus' life that makes us holy. His obedience to God's Word is reckoned to us. The word that brings us to faith also makes us holy. I have already mentioned Titus 3, where God uses the words regenerated and renewal. This is change, life-giving, inner whole-being change.

You are justified by Jesus alone, and the new life you live is called sanctification. This is where things get messy. Justification is perfect. There's nothing lacking in Jesus' righteousness and God has reckoned it to you. There is no sin that remains unforgiven. You are indeed righteous.

Sanctification, however, on this side of heaven, is imperfect. God does renew and regenerate you, but the old sinful nature still lies within. Sanctification is a process, which involves discipline and growth.

⁸ Romans 5:6-10

Through contact with His Word and Sacraments, God softens your hard hearts and enables you to respond by teaching His Word in its truth and purity and living loving lives according to it.

The sinful flesh fights against the Holy Spirit. The flesh fights against the truth of God. There is this constant tiresome battle that all too often ends just like St. Paul, ***“I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.”***⁹

Because of this constant, wearing conflict, it is easier to reverse the order of God. The most common and the most harmful falsehood ever taught is to teach that sanctification is what brings about justification; in other words, you become righteous before God as a result of living the new life that God gives you to live. This is truly wicked. It is like saying taking this medication, doing this exercise and eating these right foods performs a quadruple bypass surgery. What a diabolical teaching!

If your works had to make you righteous before God, you would have no hope, unless of course you changed God’s Word to make yourself feel better. Labeling a medication by a different name, doesn’t change the medication. Changing God’s Word doesn’t really change God’s Word.

May we ever, by God’s grace, keep the order correct; faith depends on it. First God justifies, then He sanctifies. Justification is perfect. It is complete. It is flawless. Sanctification is imperfect. This is because of the sinful flesh that stubbornly clings to our souls. Justification is complete. Sanctification is a lifelong process. In this process, He has not only given you a new heart and His Spirit, He gives you His Word and His body and His blood to guard and keep you every day.

Let us pray, “Come down, O Love divine; Seek Thou this soul of mine, And visit it with Thine own ardor glowing; O Comforter, draw near; Within my heart appear, And kindle it, Thy holy flame bestowing. O let it freely burn, Till worldly passions turn To dust and ashes in its heat consuming; And let Thy glorious light Shine ever on my sight, And clothe me round, the while my path illuming.”¹⁰ Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

⁹ Romans 7:18-20

¹⁰ Come Down, O Love Divine LSB 501:1-2

Prayer of the Church

Seventh Sunday of Easter (Exaudi): 24 May 2020

Let us pray for the whole Church of God in Christ Jesus and for all people according to their needs. For the whole Church, that in the confidence of faith, the baptized may bear witness to the grace of the Lord Jesus, regardless of the consequences, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For pastors and missionaries, that repentance and the forgiveness of sins in Christ's name would sound forth throughout the world, creating and sustaining faith in those who hear, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For this congregation, that the Spirit of truth would guide us into faithful devotion and service so that we would love one another; grow in the grace and knowledge of our Savior, Jesus Christ; and give our tithes and offerings to support His ministry and mission here and abroad, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For those who suffer for their witness to Christ, that they may be strengthened by the Spirit of truth to endure, and that they may rejoice and be glad when Christ's glory is revealed, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For our government and all leaders in this world, that they would submit themselves to the true King and Lord, Jesus Christ, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For all who serve in our armed forces, the medical field and for all emergency workers, that entrusting themselves to Christ's protection they may know His saving peace, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For an end to the pandemic, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For all graduates, for those who set out to look for new employment and for those whose plans have been frustrated or disappointed, that their confidence may always be placed in Christ, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For those whom God has granted another year of earthly life especially His servants, *Brian and Julie*; that as God would send His holy angels to guard and keep His children; that they may thank and praise him for the gift of life and for the protection and care He has provided; that God would grant them to grow in grace, continue to know His loving-kindness, abide in the confession of His care and protection, serve Him faithfully all the days of their life and finally come to the fullness of His joys in heaven; let us pray to the Lord; **Lord have mercy.**

For the sick, the afflicted, the dying, the mourning, the shut-in and the lonely, [*especially for those who have requested our prayers, including Susan, Carmen, Zoey, Ken, and those we name in our hearts,*] that Christ Himself would be their health in sickness, their joy in sorrow and their life in death, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For all who come today to the Lamb's feast, that being made partakers of Christ's divine nature in the eating and drinking of His very body and blood, they would be filled with His life and peace, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

For the faithful departed, let us offer thanks and praise, asking our heavenly Father to grant us all a share in the rest and peace of His Kingdom, let us pray to the Lord: **Lord, have mercy.**

Into Your hands, O Lord, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in Your mercy; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. **Amen.**