

Jeremiah 17:5-8  
Sixth Sunday after Epiphany  
February 13, 2022

From elementary classrooms to stores, senior facilities and homes, we see lots of hearts these days. They adorn walls and windows. Youngsters like to make valentines. As one with little artistic ability, I find it difficult to make a heart look right. Some come out lopsided. Others are too skinny or too round and fat.

Isn't that true of life? Our hearts aren't always in the best of shape. The condition of our hearts is an important matter. He was not speaking medically or artistically, but Jeremiah's message dealt with our hearts when he advised

GET YOUR HEART RIGHT

- I. Don't rely on human strength
- II. Trust in the Lord

Relying on human sources is natural because we like to think that we are in charge of our lives and what goes on in them. If we encounter a problem it is up to us to find a solution. Such a position on top of everything appeals to our pride.

We see it in youth. Even at a young age we like to show off our muscles. "Grandpa, feel how strong I am," is the boast of a young boy. Young people often feel invincible, that they are ready to take on the world. Others contribute to the attitude. When a talented individual is considering careers, well-meaning teachers and parents will say, "You can do anything you put your mind to." It is intended as a compliment, but it easily misleads someone to trust in their own abilities.

As we get older we may look more at the accomplishments than the potential, but the trust is similarly misplaced. "Look at what I made of myself. Nobody handed it to me on a silver platter, but I earned it myself. I pulled myself up by my bootstraps. I'm a self-made individual. It took a lot of work to get this far." Wasn't it Frank Sinatra who sang, "I did it my way"?

Nations can be guilty of the same error. They trust their military might and arsenal of weapons for protection. The nuclear stockpile or advanced weaponry systems such as smart bombs show their superiority. They may view their future as assured because of a good educational system that prepares citizens to be productive. Advances in science and technology are touted. Judah, the people among whom Jeremiah worked, sought their security in foreign alliances. The power of Babylon was advancing. Jeremiah had warned of defeat and captivity as coming at their

hands because his nation had strayed from worship of the true God to idolatry. Instead of repenting and looking to the Lord, the leaders of Judah sought help from Egypt. They relied on their own solutions. Listen to the conversations of people and you will hear a lot of boasting and reliance on human strength and resources.

We can state it plainly, "Trust in man is foolish." Those items I mentioned are good, often blessings from God and useful for our lives. We appreciate them but they dare not become our source of confidence. God's prophet bluntly warned, "Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the Lord." Relying on those other sources means we are turning away from the Lord and what he has to offer, despite the demonstrations of divine power we have seen in Jesus in the readings of this Epiphany season. That's treading on thin ice for sure. The text used a picturesque way of illustrating the problem. "He (the one trusting human sources) will be like a bush in the wastelands; he will not see prosperity when it comes. He will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives." Jeremiah's hearers could visualize the scene because the region east of Jerusalem was such a wasteland. The reference to uninhabited salt land fit the area around the Dead Sea, where nothing grew and people didn't live. In those territories there was little to support life, certainly not providing a comfortable existence.

Even when presented with good things such a person does not recognize them. He doesn't think he needs them. You don't seek medical care when you feel healthy. The person trusting himself or herself doesn't recognize the gospel as the only lifeline or rescue from death that it is.

Such misplaced trust in human strength when it comes to matters of our standing before God is not just unwise. It is disastrous. The prophet termed such a person cursed. They are eternally lost. Human sources cannot save, for we are sinful, not coming close to the perfection God deserves and demands. When the text mentioned flesh, remember what we are. Our first parent was made from the dust of the earth. We return to dust, that is, we die and decay. All our products and achievements will one day crumble. If our trust rests on any of them, we will perish with them. Don't rely on human strength.

Therefore knock down any self-trust. You might think. "I don't need the warning. I'm a Christian. I believe in Jesus as my Savior." We are vulnerable also. We might be tempted to think God must be happy with us because we come to church often or work so hard for the Lord. Or maybe we are thankful we are not like those who struggle with matters of faith or wallow in sin. Recall Jesus' parable of the

Pharisee and the tax collector. The super-pious Pharisee could rattle off the good things he did: fasted twice a week, tithed of all he possessed and he knew the terrible sins he avoided like robbery or adultery. He definitely was sure he was better than that scheming, cheating tax collector over on the other side who wouldn't even lift his eyes to heaven but only prayed, "God have mercy on me, a sinner." But which one did Jesus pronounce justified, that is, forgiven? The humble, penitent tax collector. Watch out for the proud attitude of the Pharisee. We need a regular reality check based on God's law to show us we are not such hot stuff but are lost sinners on our own. We need Jesus and his forgiveness.

## II.

Trust in the Lord. Why is that so much better? The name itself shows it. LORD in all capital letters is the special name God identified himself with when he called Moses at the burning bush to be leader of his people. He used that name when he was intervening to bless his people. It was the name connected with his promises. It is a gospel name, reminding us that he is faithful to those promises and gracious in his dealings with us. It is a saving name because he kept the great promise to redeem the world through his Son. Jesus was born into a human existence, lived in perfect obedience to divine law and died in place of the human race as the sacrifice that paid for our sins. We have full forgiveness in him. He has carried out the task completely and gives us the results freely. He has met all the requirements for entrance into heaven for us. That's what makes him a dependable basis for trust. He has already done it all. He delivers on his promises, no question about it. Jesus Christ has saved you. Trust him absolutely.

That dependability carries over into all aspects of life. We have what we need. Sometimes we don't think so. We envy unbelievers because they seem to come out on top. Their success isn't hampered by moral constraints or scruples about using other people and taking advantage of them to get ahead. Of course, how you define success makes a difference. Are our goals all focused on this life or do we look at the ultimate success, the eternal outcome? But even in this life God takes care of us. In his letter to the Romans the Apostle Paul noted, "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" He can and will take care of our needs, empower us to meet the challenges of each day and strengthen us to endure the troubles that will come our way. We are blessed. Our lives are secure. He answers our prayers in the best way. Trust in the Lord.

The blessings that the Lord brings are pictured by the prophet. "He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when the heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit." Believers in Jesus are like trees planted near

a flowing stream of water. They are able to grow and thrive. The stream never dries up so the trees receive needed sustenance to withstand scorching days and withering drought. They produce leaves and fruit in abundance. I'm sure you noted the similarity between Jeremiah's description and Psalm 1, which we sang earlier in the service.

What the text pictured is the Christian grounded in God and his Word. He feeds us with the living water of his gospel message. Through its nourishment our faith flourishes. Thus we can withstand the tests and trials of life. Yes, they do come to Christians. We are not exempt from the troubles sin brought into the world. God does not promise us a life of ease on this earth. But because his promises feed and sustain our faith we will not doubt his presence and care even in hard times.

The strength from the Lord and his Spirit enables us to produce fruit. I'm talking about fruits of faith, lives that bring glory to God as we follow his commands. We will strive to live as faithful and considerate spouses, good citizens of our community and country, godly children, responsible parents, honest and hardworking employees, fair employers.

The blessings of having your heart right with the Lord extend beyond today or tomorrow. The greatest gift God bestows is eternal life in heaven.

The contrast between the two conditions of relying on human strength or trusting in the Lord is stark, as today's Gospel reading also showed. There God pronounced blessings on believers but spoke words of woe and warning to unbelievers. Truly we see which is better. Be planted by the living water, rooted in the Word of God, feeding your faith through Word and sacrament, growing in faith, producing fruit as you live to God's glory.

All of us realize that our hearts are not always right with the Lord. We stray from his ways and into our own paths of sin. Come back to him in repentance. Confess your sins of trust in what is false and reliance on your own abilities. Cling to Christ as the only source of help for life and for eternity. He won't let you down.