

4th Sunday after Epiphany (January 29, 2012)

"Matters of the Heart"

Text [Ezekiel 36:26, I Corinthians 13:1-13](#)

by the [Rev. Dr. James A. Harnish](#)

I am permanently scarred and permanently blessed by having grown up among some faithful Christian folks who had rules for just about everything. We could pick out the “real” Christians by the rules they kept and the ones they didn’t. I knew that Christians didn’t smoke, drink, cuss, chew, dance, or go to movies on Sunday. I’ve still never smoked or chewed.

Remembering some of the rule-keeping folks in my past reminded me of a story about Ocean Grove, New Jersey. It’s a very special place, particularly for a couple of our church members who have spent every summer of their lives there. It was established as a Methodist camp meeting in 1869 and is still known as “God’s square mile on the Jersey Shore.” That means it’s about as far removed as you can imagine from the current TV show that is named for the same shore.

In 1904, “The New York Times” reported a raging debate at Ocean Grove about the rules for “mixed bathing,” which back then meant men and women swimming in the same ocean at the same time. The Women’s Christian Temperance Union was meeting in Newark. When some of the temperance ladies went down to Ocean Grove to see what the Methodists were up to, they were appalled. One woman wrote: “When I saw men and women tumbling in the water like hogs, without any sense of decency, I had such a shock I haven’t gotten over it.”

The Methodist clergy of the area defended Ocean Grove by declaring that “the present system of the sexes bathing together was moral and decent.” They said, “Stringent restrictions are enforced regarding bathing apparel.” In 1904, I assume that meant that you could get thrown off the beach for having a hole in the knee of your swimming suit.

Times have changed. Just thinking about what “mixed bathing” might mean “Jersey Shore” today demonstrates just how complicated things can get when you put all your eggs in the rule-keeping basket.

That’s the problem the Pharisees had with Jesus. There was, for instance, that time when the Pharisees saw the disciples eating without

washing their hands. They went ballistic. They asked, **“Why are your disciples not living according to the rules handed down by the elders but instead eat food with ritually unclean hands?”**

Jesus replied, **“Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”** (Mark 7:14-16)

Later, talking with the disciples, he used a graphic illustration of the digestive system to say that **“it is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come.”** (Mark 7:20-23)

Jesus was not saying that we shouldn't wash our hands. That's a good rule. We need to keep that rule to stay healthy, which is the reason God gave it to Moses.

Jesus wasn't throwing out all the rules. He said that he didn't come to destroy the law, but to fulfill it. Jesus' followers are not extremists who want to do away with all the rules and function solely on the basis of individual self-interest. Because of the persistent power of sin, we need reasonable rules and regulations to protect us from ourselves and each other.

It's not that the rules don't matter, but that they don't matter the most. You know and I know that religious rule-keepers can be some of the meanest, most hard-hearted people you'll meet. William Sloane Coffin often quoted Pascal saying that **“[People] never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.”** We can be right about all the rules, but still be wrong about what's in the heart.

Jesus did not come with more rules to control us from the outside, but with new love to transform us on the inside. He demonstrated the love of God that can penetrate the hardest personality, warm the coldest heart, and transform our lives from the inside out. The critical factor is not how perfectly we live by the rules, but how deeply we love from the heart.

The prophet Ezekiel gave us a picture of that when he heard the Lord say, **“I will give you a new heart and a new mind. I will take out of you the heart of stone, and give you a heart of flesh.”** (Ezekiel 36:26)

Cardiologists call that condition cardiomyopathy. It's a hardening or thickening of the heart muscle, so that the heart is incapable of pumping blood through the system. And it's deadly. You can't live with a hard heart. The most severe cases require a heart transplant.

God's promise to Ezekiel was that God can take out of us the heart of stone – cold, legalistic, unfeeling, deadly – and give us a heart of flesh – warm, sensitive, pumping life through our whole system, transforming us from the inside out.

Paul described what it means to live with that kind of love at the center of our lives in I Corinthians 13.

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

One thing that gets lost in most of our translations is that Paul describes this kind of love with verbs. He uses fifteen verbs to describe love, not as something we feel, but as something we do. It is not an emotion, but a way of behavior that is shaped by the love of God within us. Eugene Peterson tries to capture those verbs in his paraphrase.

Love never gives up.
Love cares more for others than for self.
Love doesn't want what it doesn't have.
Love doesn't strut,
Doesn't have a swelled head,
Doesn't force itself on others,
Isn't always "me first,"
Doesn't fly off the handle,
Doesn't keep score of the sins of others,
Doesn't revel when others grovel,
Takes pleasure in the flowering of truth,
Puts up with anything,
Trusts God always,
Always looks for the best,
Never looks back,

But keeps going to the end.

That's love that goes way beyond keeping the rules. It's the love of God that flows from the heart.

The heart metaphor is at the center of our spiritual heritage. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, defined "true religion" as "a heart right toward God and [others]." For followers of Christ in the Methodist tradition, the heart of the matter is always a matter of the heart.

Wesley had learned that lesson from his own experience. He had kept the rules, was raised in a faithful home, became an Anglican priest and came to America as a missionary. But he still knew that his heart wasn't right. Then, on May 24, 1738, he wrote in his journal that he "went unwillingly" to a bible study group that was meeting in Aldersgate Street in London. He said that the leader was reading from Luther's preface to the epistle to the Romans. Don't try reading that. I tried, hoping to have an experience like Wesley's, but it put me to sleep. But it worked for Wesley. He wrote, "I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ and an assurance was given to me that he had forgiven my sins, even mine, and set me free from the law of sin and death."

The fire in his "strangely-warmed" heart ignited a religious awakening that transformed England and planted the flame of Methodism on the American continent.

That's why one of our core values is being warm-hearted. You could say that we're in the heart transplant business. The center of our life together is the love of God made real in Jesus becoming a reality in and through us so that we become people who love God and love others the way we have been loved by God. It's not about living by the rules, but loving from the heart.

So, I have a question for you today. Anybody here need a new heart? Is anybody here ready to trade in a heart of stone for a heart of flesh? Wouldn't you like to have a new heart?

I invite you to join me in allowing a prayer hymn by Charles Wesley to become the prayer of our hearts.

O for a heart to praise my God,
a heart from sin set free,
a heart that always feels thy blood
so freely shed for me.

A heart in every thought renewed
and full of love divine,
perfect and right and pure and good,
a copy, Lord, of thine.

Thy nature, gracious Lord, impart;
come quickly from above;
write thy new name upon my heart,
thy new, best name of Love.
--Charles Wesley