

Sermon Title: A Whole Heart and a Willing Spirit
Scripture: Psalm 51:1-12; 119:9–16

The Psalmist today, posts these words in Psalm 51: “By your generous willing-hearted (*nadib*) Spirit, uphold me, [O Adonai], let me lean (*samak*) on you!” (My own translation). The NRSV reads: “Sustain in me a willing spirit.” (51:12) and likewise in Psalm 119, “With my whole heart I seek you, do not let me stray from your commandments. I treasure your word in my heart” (119:10-11) The Message by Eugene Peterson paraphrases these two verses: ”Lord, make a fresh start in me ... put a fresh wind in my sails!” (51:10,12); “Our heart-shattered lives are ready for love.” (119:10).

Whose line is it, anyway? Many of you remember the television series by the same name, where we found ourselves laughing at the characters stealing the leading lines from each other. The last verse of our scriptural passage for the day leaves us in such a quandary: “By your willing-hearted Spirit, sustain me!” or “Sustain in me a willing-hearted spirit.” Is the Psalmist asking God to uphold “a willing-hearted spirit” in the petitioner? Or is the Psalmist asking to be sustained by the willing-hearted Spirit of God? Whose willing-hearted spirit is it? Is it possibly both?

Martin Luther once wrote about this type of dilemma in interpreting scripture. He discovered that the prepositions “of” and “in” are the same in the Greek language, that indeed it is necessary sometimes to translate the prepositions both ways in the very same sentence. This means that when we are being encouraged *to have faith in Jesus*, we are also being asked *to have the faith of Jesus*. Believing in Jesus means placing our faith inside the faith of Jesus, or that Jesus believes so that we too may believe. So, the question becomes: Is it our faith in Christ which sustains us? Or are we sustained through the faith of Christ? Or is it both?

So, following this line of reasoning as it applies to our scriptural passage, when God’s willing-hearted Spirit enters us, it transforms our spirit into a willing-hearted spirit as well. Or perhaps, when we reach out to God with a willing-hearted spirit, God reciprocates with a willing-hearted Spirit. Here are some examples of how both, giving to receive, and receiving to give, can be true at the same time:

“Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you ... with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you (Luke 6:37-38).”

“We love because God first loved us (1 John 4:19).”

One of the stark questions from Gethsemane on the night of Jesus’ arrest, “[Peter], Were you not able to keep watch with me for one hour? The context is that Peter, James and John, and presumably all of the disciples as well, have fallen asleep in the garden. Jesus singles out Peter, perhaps because he knows him so well, and then speaks these familiar words: ... for the spirit is willing (*prothumos*), but the flesh is weak (*asthenés*).” And later again, finding them asleep a second time, “your eyes are heavy ... you need your rest”

When Jesus names Peter specifically, he is reminding us that Peter’s spirit is enthusiastically willing, positively disposed, eager and ready-to-go, eagerly predisposed, forward-in-spirit, not weighed down by pre-existing resistance. But, his body is without vigor, lacking the necessary

resources, without adequate strength to follow through on his commitments. Jesus is right in his description and observation. This is the Peter we know, isn't it? The man who is ready to draw his sword, ready to run into battle, quick to fight, but also quick to deny, and run away when surrounded by accusation. This is the Peter we know. The eager Peter, the betraying Peter, a willing spirit, a weak body, enshrined in the words of one of our old hymns, written in 1926 by Earl Marlatt, and sung by our parents and grandparents: "Are ye able, said the Master? To be crucified with me?" "Yea," the sturdy dreamers answered, "to the death we follow Thee." You may remember that Thomas the Twin, like Peter, also publicly declared his intention to "go back [to Jerusalem] and die with Jesus." (John 11:16) To Thomas, of course, we assign the role of doubter during the days after the crucifixion, but we redeem ourselves by acknowledging that Thomas also confessed Jesus as both Lord and God, one of the first to do so; and this rivals what we call the good confession made by Peter, "you are the Messiah and Son of the Living God." We still struggle with what is an eisegesis in biblical manuscripts, "to take up *the* cross," preferring instead a more common command in the gospels, "to take up *our* cross, and follow" "The spirit is willing, the body is weak."

There is a small note at the beginning of Psalm 51. The note tells us that David wrote this Psalm just after the prophet Nathan confronted him about his affair with Bathsheba and about his role in the death of Uriah (2 Sam. 12), Bathsheba's husband. The Psalm lays out David's inner grief and turmoil over Nathan's message: "You are the man, David!" Because of this deed, the child that is born to you will die." David pre-grieves the loss of his child, asking for the deep forgiveness of God to undo the words of Nathan. The Psalm reflects David's grieving. It is noteworthy that the prophet's name, Nathan, means "gift." Nathan is God's gift to David, a gift that calls him to sincere repentance, a gift that calls him to restore his relationship to God by naming the sin. Nathan is the gift that names the sin of David openly. In this naming of David's sin, it becomes possible for David to repent, turn his life around, and seek forgiveness. But, only God can create a clean heart and a right spirit. In crying out to God, David pulls out all the stops. The Hebrew verb he uses for "wash me," (Ps. 51:2) means to stomp with the feet; to make stuff clean by treading, kneading and beating with cold water." In other words, in David's cry of anguish, he asks: "God do what you have to do, beat me, knead me, tread on me to make me clean again." In the words of the Psalm, you can feel David's pain and tears as he struggles in prayer for what might have been. It is as if David were saying, 'Oh, if I could only go back and start over,' but then he realizes that one can never go back and start completely over; to turn around, one must turn aside; to repent means to name the sin and turn away from it. Lord, 'wash me whiter than snow!' Do not abandon me, O Lord. I am a willing spirit, but I have a broken heart.

Second Isaiah records these words: "Lord, give me the tongue of a teacher that I may know how to sustain the weary (*yaeph* – fatigued of mind and spirit) with a seasoned word. (Is. 50:4)" It is true clergy often struggle to provide such a seasoned word, the right word at the right time, a word that is both caring and challenging at the same time. Paul writes in Gal. 6:9-10, "So let us **NOT** grow weary (*ekkakeó* – to fail in heart, to be exhausted, utterly spiritless) in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith." The Sursum Corda (Latin: "**Lift up your hearts**" or literally, "Lifted hearts") dates back to the 3rd century CE and is part of the opening dialogue in the most ancient of liturgies of the early

Christian Church. It is still part of the liturgy surrounding Communion and Eucharist in many worship services today, underscoring the spiritual needs of so many today.

The United Church of Christ where I served in Kansas used these words in their monthly celebration of Communion: “Lift up your hearts; we lift them to the Lord; Let us give thanks to the Lord our God. It is right to give God thanks and praise!”

Watchman Nee (1903 – 1972), a Christian leader and evangelist, of the Methodist/Anglican and Plymouth Brethren tradition, and who was persecuted and imprisoned in Communist China for his faith, took a stand for open communion in China, against the advice of his superiors. He writes these words: “When our eyes are opened to see that the Spirit has already been poured out because Jesus has already been glorified, then prayer turns to praise in our hearts.”

We often translate the Hebrew word, “Shalom” with the English word “Peace,” but it actually means more than that. Its full meaning might translate better as “wholeness.” To wish Shalom to another, we are wishing a wholeness to our peace, a full peace, a full sense of health and life. As an example, we might think of Judas Iscariot, the one who betrays Jesus in the garden with a kiss, the one who ate from the same bowl with Jesus, dipping his fingers/hand in the same bowl, at the Table of the Last Supper, the Passover meal (Jn 13:26; Mk 14:20). And, if we believe the Gospel of John, Judas the one whom Jesus feeds from that bowl, dipping the bread, literally the sop, in it and giving it to Judas, as a form of Communion by intinction with Judas.

The Psalmist writes of one called a “Shalom” buddy in 41:9: “Even my bosom friend, my Shalom Buddy, in whom I trusted, who ate of my bread, has lifted the heel against me,” The one who shares wholeness with me, the one who shares health with me, the one who shares wellness, and peace with me, is the one who betrays me. This betrayal is particularly egregious because of the closeness with which it is betrayed. Betrayed in the beautiful garden of wholeness and peace, where Jesus sweats drops of blood during his praying. Nonetheless, despite any foreknowledge, Jesus seeks a wholeness and peace with Judas, a Shalom beyond what the world can give. And, Judas, a victim of moral injury, agential moral injury, must come to grips with the love of Jesus that forgives in advance of the deed. The church is called to hear the confessions of Judas as well as the confessions of Peter!

The Psalmist says: “With my whole heart I seek you!” King David, prays that God will give his son Solomon a “whole heart” to keep and carry out the divine commandments, decrees, statutes. And to build the First Temple with such a heart. The whole heart is one without pretense or deceit (Jer. 3:10). Blessed are those who trust in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD (Jer. 17:7), where trust is a verb and a noun, where heart is both being and becoming at the same time. The celebrated name of God, the Great ‘I AM’ is both active and future at the same time; indeed, past, present, future: I was, I am, I will be, that is my name. I am verbal. I am Adonai! The holy One whose name should not be spoken, since to *noun* the Holy One is to seek to control the divine (don’t do it); to *verb* the Holy One is to trust the divine. “In [the Great ‘I am], we live and move and have our being!” (the words of Paul). To assert the Omnipresence of God, is to reject all forms of idolatry; because every time we try to carve out a place in our world where God is not, to hide from God, we are denying that God is everywhere. God is not just universal, but multi-versal as scholars now say, Quantum in essence! In mathematical terms, linear algebra terms to be specific, God is a Vector of sums rather than a single sum. In Theological terms, a

synthesis which is greater than the sum of all the parts.

Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart imagined or conceived, of the heart-world planned for those who love God.” (1 Cor 2:9; Is. 64:4).

Soren Kierkegaard writes that to “will only one thing, which one thing is the good, is to be pure of heart, and to will more than that one thing, is to be double-minded.” Or we might also say double-hearted. (“Draw near to God and God will draw near to you, clean your hands, purify your hearts.” - James 4:8). In this regard, a willing spirit is a focused spirit; an unwilling spirit is a scattered spirit. Our heart-decisions determine who we are. Deceit is in the mind of those who devise evil, but those who counsel peace have joy (Prov 12:20). Like the seed sown among thorns in Jesus’ parable, such seed cannot succeed when deceit chokes the word and makes it unfruitful.(Mt 13:22). When your heart is not right, your neck stiffens and you cannot produce fruit; so please, please, make your heart right.

The eagerness to give is worth half again more than the giving itself. What we call the spirit of the widow’s mite is that she contributed with a willing mind, without regret or compulsion, paying it forward, as we say today. (Lk. 21:4; 2 Cor. 8:12; 9:7). What the First Testament calls a “freewill offering” is one brought forward “by those whose hearts made them willing,” by those with “a willing spirit and a stirred heart.” (Ex. 35:21, 29). “Give generously without a grudging spirit,” says Deuteronomy 15:10.

A few years ago, I invested a little over \$100 to purchase a book by O.C. Edwards, Jr. entitled *A History of Preaching*. I am now reading through the section of sermons from the early Middle Ages and I came across a sermon attributed to Caesarius of Arles from the sixth century. He writes (preaches) that when we become restless and weary in the hunger of our souls, we should ask God to put a “sabbath in our heart.” He describes this as being “swift to hear and slow to answer,” letting faith be the firstborn of our heart. Bind steadfast love and faith around your neck and write them on the tablet of your heart, says Proverbs 3:3

As a popular saying goes, we must not be ‘so busy with the work of the Lord that we forget the Lord of the work.’ This 2-way meaning, the faith of Jesus, the faith in Jesus, the lord of the work, the work of the Lord, echoes the verse from Colossians “whatever you do, work at it with all your heart.” (3:23-24) Just as we are co-creators with God, co-spirited with Christ in our giving, co-sufferers also with Christ through the way of the cross. Not that we were born to suffer, or that Christ was born to suffer, but that ***we are to stand together against human suffering in the world.*** My best image of atonement, or, as Barton Stone once put it, at-onement, is **NOT** the one we inherit from Crusades of the Middle Ages, or from the Roman Empire, often called substitutionary suffering, but is the one recorded in Ephesians 4:8, “When Christ ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive (he led many prisoners to freedom); he gave gifts to his people.” Jesus came to preach peace, to make peace and to be peace; and through the cross to put hostility itself to death [hatred, retribution, revenge, jealousy, greed, shame] (Eph 2:16). The Apostle Paul writes: “Complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.” We might also say, “being of the same heart,” for the Greek word used here for mind, means “the parts around the heart,” to be of one mind and heart, united in soul. “Stand up together, he tells the Philippians, “strive side-by-side for the gospel.”

The Lamb of God is, one and the same, the Lion of Judah; the Lion and Lamb lie down together, saying "I am meek and lowly in heart!" Resist injustice; stand against wrongdoing! Do not seek retaliation, only the invincible love of Jesus Christ, which is our Easter Faith! Alleluia! Amen!