

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“The Heart of the Matter: A Radically Reoriented Heart”
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Isaiah 50:4-9, Luke 19:28-40

We had hope though we probably shouldn't have. It was my senior year in college at Trinity University in San Antonio, a school of about 2,300 students, and our soccer team, of which I was a member was headed down Interstate 35 to play the team from the University of Texas at Austin; a school of 40,000. We had played them in the second game of our season and been, well, trounced, 11-0. They were better at every phase of the game. Even though we had players from around the world, we were no match for them. I wish I could say we had improved dramatically since then, but we were on the tail end of a losing season. If we had lost 11-0 on our home field, there was little doubt as to the outcome of the pending encounter. But we had hope. We had that kind of hope which is at the heart of the American experience. So in the 90 degree heat we took them on, and when the final whistle blew we stared in amazement at the scoreboard. Trinity 1, UT 0. Somehow, our hope had not been in vain.

In some ways this is the stuff of dreams right? It is the 1980 United States Olympic Hockey team. It is David beating Goliath. It is a 15th seed defeating a number 2 seed in the NCAA basketball tournament. It is the reason we never give up...except when, the only reasonable thing to do is to give up; to surrender. I say that because there are times when there is no other sane option. This is what Robert E. Lee did at the Appomattox Courthouse. This is what Cornwallis did at Yorktown. This is what Napoleon did at Waterloo. This is what Rubio, Carson, Fiorina, Christy and countless others have done this primary season. They have understood clearly that they were not only part of a losing cause, but that the better part of valor was to surrender, give in and in some cases endorse someone else. There are those moments, as I said, when this is the only sane course of action for people that will protect themselves and those who had chosen to serve them. Which is why it would have probably been the thing that Jesus should have done as well.

Jesus had been causing waves. Jesus had been drawing crowds. There were people who wanted to make him king. There were people who would rally around him. Yet as he moved toward Jerusalem, it was more than apparent that the only outcome of this course of action would be his death. King Herod Antipas was after him. The Romans were going to have no part of a would-be king of the Jews. They had already in fact crucified numerous others. And by continuing his march to the capitol, Jesus was also endangering his followers. It was a fool's errand. Yet not only did Jesus continue on to Jerusalem, he made sure that everyone knew that he was coming. In fact he acted as if this was his coronation. Each step in this process was carefully choreographed. No one had ever ridden on a donkey before, so he rode on a donkey into the city. Cloaks were spread on the ground. His followers were praising God for all the acts of power that they had witnessed. They were chanting the Psalm, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord.” Each of these acts was intended to say, here comes the king. In the moment when he should have either headed for the hills into a comfortable retirement, or surrendered he did neither. He walked right into the belly of the beast. The crucial question is, why?

Jesus goes on because he has hope; hope that in and through what he will do on the cross he will create a new kingdom; a kingdom based not on the acquisition and abuse of power but on the grace and love of God. Jesus will create a kingdom that looks like the kingdom desired by God; one in which there is justice, mercy and enough for all. And this kingdom will be possible because Jesus, in his ultimate act of self-giving will create new kinds of people to be citizens of that kingdom; people with radically reoriented hearts; hearts turned away from hate, prejudice, greed and fear and radically reoriented toward the love and grace of God and neighbor.

The people around Jesus believed that the Romans were “the problem” and that if Jesus just got rid of them everything would be fine; God’s kingdom would be perfect. But Jesus understood that the Romans were not the problem. He knew this because even when Jews had been free they had rulers who conquered and oppressed not only the nations around them but their own people. The problem was not who was in charge, but was with the constricted hearts of human beings; hearts bent inward and filled with prejudice, anger, hatred and greed. Only by radically reorienting the human heart could the trajectory of history be changed. Only by sacrificial love, only by going to the cross could those hearts be turned outward toward God. So when Jesus moved forward into the city making a claim to kingship, it was of a real kingdom that was to come. But it would also be a kingdom like no other, a kingdom which would be organized around the love issuing forth from radically reoriented hearts.

The gift that we have been given is that we have radically reoriented hearts. When we confess Jesus as Lord, it is a recognition of that reality. We have the capacity to reject fear, hate, prejudice and arrogance. We can be those who live and love sacrificially. The problem is that we live in a world in which the powers and principalities as Paul calls them do not like radically reoriented hearts. For a heart that has been reoriented is focused solely on God and what God desires. It is not focused on what the powers and principalities desire. It cannot be manipulated to do the whim and will of the powers. So the powers do all they can to re-constrict our hearts. They try to cause us to fear, to hate, to desire what we don’t need. They try to once again constrict our hearts so that we will do what they and not God desire. So the question becomes, how to maintain our heart health? How do we maintain our radically reoriented hearts?

The answer is that we have to work at it. Just as we work to maintain our physical heart health, we have to work to maintain our radically reoriented hearts as well. And so, what I want to offer you on this Palm Sunday is radically reoriented heart health routine. There are five parts to it, and the best part is that you can do the first three before you get out of bed in the morning. Step one in the routine is, as you wake, open yourself to God. Ask what it is that God wants of you on this day. Be silent, be open and allow God to fill you. The second part is to confess. Spend a few minutes confessing where you have allowed your heart to be constricted; to be recaptured by the powers of this world. For it is only by acknowledging those movements toward constriction that we can reverse their course. Step three is receiving forgiveness. Many of us are very good at confessing but not very good at receiving forgiveness. The problem is that if we do not allow ourselves to be forgiven, we become stuck in the past and cannot move forward with our heart realignment process.

The next two steps come after you have begun your day. Step four is to offer up an act of sacrificial love. It is to offer up an act of kindness, love and compassion to someone who might not be expecting it; who needs to be touched by love and grace. In so doing we are actually exercising our hearts. We are unrestricting them. The final step is to become part of a community that supports your work of radically realigning your hearts. My guess is that many of us have tried to diet or exercise on our own and have not been all that successful. However when we have become part of a group, a community that works with us, we have found our efforts to be much more successful. The same is true for continuing to radically realign our hearts. If we are in a community that walks with us, encourages us and supports us as we do so, we are much more likely to stay the course and align ourselves with the love of God in Jesus Christ.

Over the past several weeks in our study on The Heart of the Matter, we have examined how God wants our hearts to be strong, steadfast, repentant, open and loving. But none of those heart qualities are possible unless we have continued to work at the radical realignment of our hearts. That then, as we enter this holiest of weeks, is my challenge to you, to ask, how am I working to continually radically reorient my heart so that I might daily show the love and grace of God in Jesus Christ to all.