

AFFIRMATIVE ACTIONS

Sermon, September 29, 2019

Texts: Jeremiah 32:1-15; I Timothy 6:6-19

Christiaan Barnard of South Africa was the first doctor to successfully perform a heart transplant, that landmark operation took place December 3, 1967. His second transplant was January 2, 1968; to a 58 year old dentist by the name of Philip Blaiberg. I've told this story before, but I love the imagery -- a week after the surgery, Dr. Barnard asked the patient if he would like to see his old heart. Dr Barnard took a glass jar containing Blaiberg's old heart off a shelf and handed it to him ... and for the first time in human history, a man actually looked at his own heart. The doctor and the patient both stared in silence taking in the existential significance of the moment. Philip Blaiberg then commented: *"So that is the old heart that caused me so much trouble."* This man literally had a change of heart.

"So that is the old heart that caused me so much trouble." Figuratively speaking, our old hearts have caused (and are causing!) all of us so much trouble! The prophet Jeremiah spoke much about this "heart" imagery. He declared in 17:9, *"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?"* Jeremiah also received a promise from God about a new heart, 24:7 -- *"I will give them a heart to know Me, that I am the LORD. They will be My people, and I will be their God, for they will return to Me with all their heart."* And in 32:39 -- *"I will give them one heart and one way, so they will always fear Me for their own good and the good of their children after them. (emphasis added ... slc).* God promises He will give a change of heart to all who come to Him. He will help rid us of the old heart that has caused us so much trouble and give us a new heart ... and if I may stretch the analogy, the Donor of the new heart is none other than His Son, who gave His life that we might live. Ezekiel 36:26 -- *"I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh."*

God wants to give us a good heart, a faithful heart, a heart that is not deceitful, a heart that will beat for higher purposes ... a heart that will, in the words of playwright George Bernard Shaw, *"...take a mob of appetites and make them into an organized army of purposes and principles."*¹ I like Shaw's imagery; this is what sanctification is all about: our new heart taking this unruly mob of appetites and desires that make up our human bodies and making them into an army that will fight the good fight, an army governed by a good general, a heart that beats for high purposes, glorious principles. A heart, to put it simply, that can tell right from wrong, constructive from destructive, good from evil, and take the mob of human appetites and make them work together for higher purposes.

Something I've long had in my file is from an old sermon of Harry Emerson Fosdick, one of America's most well-known preachers in his day. Speaking to our old heart's deceitful tendencies, Mr. Fosdick gives us *"Six Ways to Distinguish Right from Wrong."* The six criteria, the six "tests", are as follows:

- 1, The Common Sense Test.** The first step in discerning right from wrong in our actions is to apply Common Sense. That seems easy; unfortunately, common sense isn't all that common nowadays. How many times have you asked yourself in regret, *"What was I thinking?"* When we are contemplating some action, we need to think! Sometimes we just don't know why something doesn't seem right, at such times we need to trust our God-given instincts. Use the common sense God put in our redeemed hearts, and trust it. One good way to engage your common sense is to ask yourself: *"How would I judge someone else if that person did the same thing I'm contemplating doing?"* If it doesn't seem right, don't do it! Use your common sense.
- 2. The Sportsmanship Test.** Ask yourself, *"Am I playing fair?"* How would you feel if someone else did the same thing to you or to someone you loved? The essence of sportsmanship is that in a game we do not make one set of rules for ourselves and one for the opposing team. If it is not right for *everyone*, it is probably not right for *anyone*. It's just another way applying the Golden Rule, *"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."* If what I am contemplating isn't fair, then it is most likely wrong. Be a good sport.
- 3. The Best Self Test.** Ask yourself, *"Will this action help me become a better person?"* Will this contemplated action help me be better; will it help me be the best I can be? If not, why would I want to do it?
- 4. The Publicity Test.** Ask yourself, *"If everyone knew what I am doing, or what I am planning to do, would I still do it?"* Would I want everyone to know what I am doing right now? Would I want my friends to know, my parents to know, that woman I'm trying to impress to know? Would I want the police to know? Generally speaking, things done in secret are neither good nor healthy, and more often than not lead to destructive ends.

¹ Though a different context, this phrase is found in Act one of Shaw's play, *"Man and Superman."* See <http://www.bartleby.com/157/1.html>

5. **The Most Admired Person Test:** This is similar to the Publicity Test, but with a slightly different twist. Think about the person you most admire, and ask, *"What would that person think of me if s/he knew what I am contemplating doing?"* Or, if you had to tell that person about what you did or are about to do, would you feel proud or ashamed? If the answer is "ashamed," well, that should give us serious pause.
6. **The Foresight Test.** Think: *"What could possibly go wrong?"* Could you live with those consequences? Perhaps more importantly, could you make others live with the potential consequences of your actions? If not, then it is usually wise to put off that action. You are not the only person affected by the consequences!

I'd like to add a seventh test to the list, based on today's Old Testament reading:

7. **The Affirmative Action Test:** *(I'm speaking of "affirmative action" in the proper sense of that phrase; I'm not speaking of racial or gender "quotas.")* Think, *"Does this action I'm contemplating affirm or deny my faith?"* Are my actions "affirmative actions," do these actions affirm what I truly believe, or are they acting contrary to what I profess to believe? Do these actions come from the *heart* of my faith?

The Old Testament text today is subtitled, *"Jeremiah Buys a Field."* But could be better subtitled, *"Jeremiah's Affirmative Action."* The setting for chapter 32 was the second year of the siege of Jerusalem by the armies of Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon (*Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in 586 BC*). It was a dark time. The Babylonians were literally at the gate, they were patiently building earthen ramps to breach the walls; the city was doomed, and Jeremiah himself was under house arrest, as he had angered King Zedekiah with his prophecies. It is while he is thus confined that he is watching his God-given predictions of doom come true.

So, he's imprisoned, the barbarians are at the gate, the city is doomed ... what an opportune time for him to make an investment in local real estate! Even the field he wants to buy is already occupied by the Babylonians. But this investment he is making is a public affirmation of his faith ... a public demonstration of his sure and certain trust in the promises of God. For God had promised His prophet that, though this disaster is coming, and they would be carried off into exile, the exile would end and the nation would be restored. As Jeremiah relates the story to King Zedekiah, God had told Jeremiah his cousin Hanamel is going to come and offer his field for sale; and He told Jeremiah, in so many words: *"Buy it. Go ahead. Invest in the security of My promises. You can bank on them!"* And Jeremiah does! He literally puts his money where his mouth is; more properly, he puts his money where his *heart* is. He has a heart *for* God; he has a heart *from* God, and his use of his pocketbook gives evidence of that; he takes affirmative action by affirmatively and faithfully and publicly investing in what he believes (*which is a great lesson of stewardship, by the way ... but that's almost another sermon*). This was Jeremiah's very public **affirmative action** of faith in the promises of God. The transaction is publicly carried out with legal precision; signing, sealing, the presence of witnesses and the whole works. Verse 14: *"This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Take these documents, both the sealed and unsealed copies of the deed of purchase, and put them in a clay jar so they will last a long time. For this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Houses, fields and vineyards will again be bought in this land."* So, Jeremiah affirmatively follows through and buys the field.

(The following was cut from the sermon due to time constraints; I include it here: -- If there is an over-arching theme which emerges out of our two lectionary readings today, it is a question: "Where do you and I seek security?" Money seems to be the thing most people regularly think of when it comes to security. We even use the word "security" as a synonym for property, with its attendant analysts, salespeople and traders. But are securities really all that secure? That question, of course, leads to attempts to shelter our securities. But is there really such a thing as a sheltered security? That sounds like an oxymoron! "Some people, eager for money," writes Paul, "have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs." When we invest our lives in the pursuit of money alone, we do wander from the faith and we do set ourselves up for much grief and heartache. Paul continues, "But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith: take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses." In short, invest your life in the security of God's promises. Set your "transplanted" hearts on things above. Receive whatever resources or opportunities you have as God's gifts from above. For when we treat our resources, our time, our opportunities as God's gifts, we transform them from something to hoard into something we have been given to use in ways that actively affirm our hope in God and His promises.)

The analogy of a transplanted heart isn't a perfect analogy, for our hearts won't be fully "transplanted" this side of eternity. But, they are in the process of being changed. In the meantime, let's use these seven "tests" to help quiet our old, deceitful hearts and live according to the desires of our new hearts of faith. **1. The Common Sense Test.** *"Does this seem right?"* **2. The Sportsmanship Test.** *"Am I playing fair?"* **3. The Best Self Test.** *"Will this action help me become a better person?"* **4. The Publicity Test.** *"Would I want everyone to know what I am doing right now?"* **5. The Most Admired Person Test:** *"Would I want the person I most admire seeing me doing this?"* **6. The Foresight Test.** *"Could I live with those consequences if things go wrong?"* and especially **7. The Affirmative Action test:** *"Does this action I'm contemplating affirm or deny the faith which I profess?"*