

### Lent 3 / March 7, 2021

#### John 2:25

*“He knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for He Himself knew what was in man.”*

“Jesus cleanses the temple of the human heart.”

What’s in your heart? Heart disease is a leading cause of death in the Western World. More people die of heart disease than many other leading causes combined. When all is said and the pandemic is over and done, more people will have died of heart disease in North America than of Covid-19. If a time comes when people no longer die of Covid-19, people will continue to die of heart disease. From a physical perspective all of us need to ask ourselves, ‘What’s in our hearts?’ I’ll tell you what’s in my heart. The remnants of several thousand cheeseburgers, with fries and gravy. Not an abundance of vegetables so as to lower cholesterol. I always thought that God made cattle to eat the vegetables for me, so I just assumed that protection from cholesterol and plaque came with the cheeseburgers.

Heart disease hasn’t always been a leading cause of death. Actually, it’s a disease associated with longevity. In medieval Europe, leading causes of death included: plague, tuberculosis, malnutrition and warfare. Life expectancy was between 50-55, for people who survived childhood. Most people didn’t live long enough to die of heart disease. As soon as one leading cause of death declines, another rises to take its place. Heart disease ascended as a leading cause of death when food became abundant and cheeseburgers, fries and gravy became affordable and accessible to the general population. Once a disease of the privileged who could afford a full meal deal, heart disease has become a threat to all of us.

What’s in our hearts? No matter what we put into, or don’t put into our hearts, a day will come when our hearts will stop. There are no five-thousand-year-old vegans, doing yoga and meditating. No amount of veggie burgers is going to produce enough good cholesterol to keep our hearts ticking forever. The condition of our hearts is a fundamental life concern, but the most dangerous and lethal heart condition is a heart that is infected by sin. That’s an eternal life concern! The true cause of death, no matter what form it takes, or in what manner it comes to us, whether by cheese burger or Coronavirus, is the brokenness of the human heart in relationship with God, caused by sins.

The Lord said to the prophet Jeremiah, *“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick.”* He wasn’t talking about our cholesterol levels. He was talking about our sinful nature. Jesus said, *“out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness slander.”* Jesus came to cleanse our hearts of sin and to cure us of the greatest and most lethal disease of the heart, by healing in us in relationship with our heavenly Father through the blood of His cross. Isaiah said, *“He was wounded for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His stripes we are healed.”* When we take Him to heart as our Saviour, He heals our hearts in forgiveness and draws us close to the Father’s heart in peace.

Our reading this morning, which began with Jesus cleansing the temple by casting out the buyers and sellers and chasing the cattle away, concludes with John observing that Jesus refused to entrust Himself to anyone, even those who believed in Him, because He knew what is in a human being. What is in humans that is so bad that He wouldn’t even entrust Himself to those who believed in Him? How is that linked to the preceding verses, in which He asserts His authority over the temple, by referring to His body as the temple, saying *“Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up”*? What is in human beings, including those who believe in Him, that is so bad? The answer is sin!

We call them Saints Peter, James and John, but not even His closest disciples were without sin. They were proud, self-seeking and self-centered. Their sin was manifested in many ways, as was the sin of those who opposed Jesus. In fact, the manifestation of their sin could be even more detrimental to the fulfilment of Jesus’ mission than the sin of the people who opposed Him. When Jesus told the disciples that as the Christ, He must go to Jerusalem, suffer and die, Peter chastised Him and vowed to prevent it, saying, *“Lord this will never happen to you.”* Peter the believer, would have prevented Jesus the Saviour, from doing the very thing that was necessary to heal our hearts from the disease of sin.

The human heart is deceitful above all things, including the hearts of believers. Sometimes especially the hearts of believers, when we fail to distinguish between our thoughts and God's thoughts, our desires and what God desires. How often have Christians done the devil's work, while thinking they were doing the Lord's work? Many times. Ask the Jews! Peter confessed Jesus as the Christ, but in his religious zeal, Peter was doing the devil's work, by tempting Jesus from the cross. Jesus rebuked him harshly saying, "*Get behind me Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.*" There would be no forgiveness without the cross. There is healing for a sin sick heart in relation to God in the cross and in the cross alone.

Jesus cleanses our hearts from sin through the sacrifice of His body, the true temple of God, on the cross. The purpose of the temple was to embody the presence of God among Israel and to serve as a place where sacrifices were offered to atone for the sin of the people, to cleanse their hearts! Jesus truly and fully embodies the presence of God in His body. What the temple expressed in terms of God's presence among His people, Jesus expressed fully in His body, as God with us. What the temple promised in terms of the forgiveness of sins, Jesus fulfilled through the sacrifice of His body on the cross, to atone for human sin. Jesus is the cure for a sin sick heart.

Over the centuries, commentators have struggled with two things regarding our text from John. First, why does John place it at the start of Jesus' public ministry, when the other gospels place it during the last week of His life, immediately before the cross? Second, why did Jesus cast the buyers, the sellers and the cattle out of the temple complex? How were people going to get animals to offer for sacrifice? Joseph and Mary bought two turtledoves for Mary's cleansing and Jesus' dedication on the fortieth day of His birth. Surely there was no sin in simply supplying animals for people to purchase for the sacrifices God commanded in the law through Moses.

More than this, people could only sacrifice at the Jerusalem temple. It was a sin to sacrifice anywhere else. In Deuteronomy the Lord commanded, "*You shall seek the place that the Lord your God will choose out of all the tribes to put His name and make His habitation there. There you shall go and there you shall bring your burnt offerings and your sacrifices.*" At Jesus' time, devout Jews came to Jerusalem from all over the Roman world. It was hardly realistic for people to bring their own cattle from great distances. Some say it was because the sellers charged exorbitant prices for animals, while the money changers charged an excessive rate of exchange. No doubt those things are true. Remember the heart is deceitful above all things and 'business is business', as they say.

But Jesus' actions suggest something deeper than the simple correction of corrupt business practices, which probably resumed immediately after He departed. He had come to cleanse more than the temple of corrupt practices. He had come to cleanse the human heart of sin, from which comes every corrupt practice and sinful action. Jesus said, "*Out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks.*" He would cleanse the human heart by the sacrifice of His body, the true temple, in which all the fulness of God dwelt in bodily form.

The sacrifice of His body would fulfill everything that the sacrifices of the temple pointed to, but which only He could accomplish. He would atone for human sin and pay our debt, through the blood of His cross! After Jesus' sacrifice the animals could be taken out of the temple complex and set free. They had served their purpose. They would no longer be needed. When Jesus died, the curtain that separated the priests from the Holy Place where God's glory dwelt, was torn in two from top to bottom. His sacrifice atoned for the sin of the world. Believers no longer needed to make pilgrimage to Jerusalem. They could worship God wherever they gathered. Jesus makes His dwelling in the hearts of all who believe. Wherever believers gather, Jesus is there. Jesus cleanses our hearts and makes our bodies His holy temples.

In Psalm 22 the psalmist prays, "*May your hearts live forever.*" Our hearts may not live forever in time, but in Jesus they will live forever in eternity. He has taken away the sin of the world, which is the source of every disease and the cause of death in the world. He enters our hearts through His word, gives us His Spirit and makes us believers. He daily cleanses our hearts of sin through the washing of baptism, by the working of the Holy Spirit, who dwells within us. He nourishes our spirits and strengthens our hearts in faith, through the gift of His body and blood; given and shed for the forgiveness of sin. One day He will return and undo the effect of sin on our hearts. He will raise us up body and soul. He will create new hearts within us. Until that day may Jesus cleanse our hearts in forgiveness and strengthen our hearts with His grace. Amen