

# “Heart Renewal”

Mark 1:21-28, Ezekiel 36:26-27, Psalm 111

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What limits you? What is keeping you from being your true self? How do you need to be set free? Is there a bad habit you want to stop? Our gospel reading tells how God is setting us free from unclean spirits. An unclean spirit is anything that diminishes your goodness, beauty, love or joy. Evil is the absence of love, the absence of God. Jesus amazed people by setting them free of unclean spirits and filling them with joyful love.

**Mark 1:21-28 (NLT) “Jesus and his companions went to the town of Capernaum. When the Sabbath day came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, for he taught with real authority—quite unlike the teachers of religious law. Suddenly, a man in the synagogue who was possessed by an unclean spirit began shouting, “Why are you interfering with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!” Jesus cut him short. “Be quiet! Come out of the man,” Jesus ordered. At that, the unclean spirit screamed, threw the man into a convulsion, and then came out of him. Amazement gripped the audience, and they began to discuss what had happened. “What sort of new teaching is this?” they asked excitedly. “It has such authority! Even unclean spirits obey his orders!” The news about Jesus spread quickly throughout the entire region of Galilee.”**

Jesus taught grace, love, and repentance. Jesus taught how God is almighty, able, desiring to perfect us. Jesus taught that he was the light, always shining, dispersing darkness; darkness will never overcome the light of God. Jesus taught that God has power over every evil and is overcoming evil. Jesus made his teaching reality by welcoming unclean people, even the most troubled outsiders, to receive his healing power. People were impressed, excited, astounded. They were no longer just hearing about God. They were experiencing God. Their lives were being renovated by God. It was exciting to see how lives were improving. During worship they were being released from captivity and made whole.

Today we have the power of the Holy Spirit. Hopefully you come every week expecting real transformation, expecting to be forgiven, rejuvenated, increasing your capacity to receive and give love. Worship is a vibrant, exciting experience that set us free from our unclean spirits enabling us to be more joyful and loving.

Some voices say that we cannot change, that a damaged relationship will not become vibrant again, that unclean spirits will grab us rendering us helpless, that we will be beaten down becoming less than human, oppressed, losing our distinct voice, our unique beauty tarnished, that evil will rob us of our better selves.

Jesus says you will change, relationships will be life giving. Jesus is changing us and the world. Jesus is restoring us, helping us find our voice, be our true self. Jesus enables us to shine with our unique beauty. Jesus is empowering us in creative ways so we can joyfully reveal our true identity. Jesus is setting us free.

The prophet Ezekiel speaks of God’s transformation of each of us. **Ezekiel 36:26-27 NLT “I will give you a new heart. I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart. And I will put my Spirit in you so that you will follow my decrees and be careful to obey my regulations.”**

Charles Spurgeon said. “The Holy Spirit can produce within your heart all those emotions you are seeking for, all those desires you gladly would feel, all the melting, and the moving, and the yearning, and the rejoicing, which are significant of the Grace of God. Under the influence of that Truth of God, as in a moment, my deadness and coldness were driven away, and I was filled with adoring love.”

Spurgeon invites us to notice the language of God putting a new loving heart within us. Four times God declares “I will.” It is not “I will if” or “I will perhaps” or “I will upon certain conditions;” rather, “I will give you a new tender, responsive heart, and a new spirit. God speaks with powerful, creative, wonderful language, like

the words spoken to create the cosmos. God who spoke all into being continues to speak words of grace to you, me, and all people. "I will put a new heart within you," within everyone. You will receive a heart capable of love beyond your majestic dreams. A heart that is always joyful, celebrating goodness, a heart that knows just what to say to and do for family and friends. A heart that inspires every thought and action to be performed with love so you will never hurt anyone or yourself in any way. You will build yourself and others up into the very likeness of Jesus.

I wonder about the timing of us receiving our new heart. Is it a lifelong process? Is our new heart given to us at our resurrection? Do we receive our new heart over and over again? Do we have fleeting moments of grand love, then falter needing another new heart? The scripture seems to say that all people will receive a new heart. When does that happen? These are questions for you to wrestle. The complete answer is probably not accessible this side of heaven.

Does God wait until we do something to request our new heart like the man who came to worship in Capernaum? God is aware of our unclean spirits, our demons, our imperfections. God can cleanse us from all that diminishes us in any way right now. Yet, God will not force us to love. God's love for each of us is too strong to violate our free will. God's love set us free. God desires to partner with us in transformation. In the gospel story, the man came to worship. The man came to praise God, to confess his unclean spirits, to be surrounded by people eager to support him in living his renovated life. The man desired to change, and Jesus honored his desire.

It seems that one day we will receive a new, eternal perfect heart by God's grace, by simply willing to receive love and share love. Yet it also seems that today, here on earth, God works with us in developing our new heart. God seems to want us to desire our new heart, for us to exercise our heart growing our love, for us to want to let go of all that diminishes us, for us to want to leave the familiar, to change, to go forward into the glorious unknown of abundant blessings.

Psalms 111 gives us tangible steps we can take on our journey for our new heart. The psalmist sings. **"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."** Fear means many constructive things. The fear of the Lord is positive reverence and respect. The fear of the Lord is holy awe and wonder, astonishment in what God is doing in our lives. It is being inspired by beauty all around and in us and being inspired by the steadfast, forgiving renewing love of God with all people since the beginning of time. This fear acknowledges God's good intentions, praises God for being in control and celebrates God's power over unclean spirits to transform us. It is sort of like the fear a child has for a good, loving, kind parent or the fear an athlete has for an exceptional coach. The desire is to please, improve, excel, become your very best; so whenever you fail, you fear the correction of your parent or the wind sprints from your coach. It is fear that inspires us to be everything we have the capacity to be, the internal force that drives us to become the fullness of ourselves, it is living life enthusiastically. It is fear of how you are hurting yourself and others. The fear of the Lord is self-awareness of what we do to hinder ourselves, fear that we cannot on our own get life right, so we accept the grace of God to enable us to love completely and live abundantly. Charles Spurgeon says "This fear is grounded in a person's discovery of the absolute sovereignty of God's grace." Homiletics Magazine says, "Our wisdom begins when we look up to God with awe and respect. When we are willing to trust; God shapes us into more faithful people. Praise, discovery, trust move us from a human centered approach to a God centered attitude. As we make the shift God shapes us into more thankful, understanding and loving people." In short, the fear of the Lord and the beginning of wisdom is changing from being self-centered to God-centered. Fear of the Lord drives us to seek God, to discover love in every situation, to pursue love, to learn from love and so eventually to become love. Karl Barth said it is "the art of living."

The psalmist sings. **Psalm 111 NRSV "Praise the Lord! I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation. Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them. Full of honor and majesty is God's work, and God's righteousness endures forever. God has gained renown by God's wonderful deeds; the Lord is gracious and merciful. God provides food for those who fear God; God is ever mindful of God's covenant. God has shown God's people the power of God's works, in giving them the heritage of the nations. The works of God's hands are faithful and just; all God's precepts are trustworthy. They are established forever and ever, to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness. God sent redemption to God's people; God has**

**commanded God's covenant forever. Holy and awesome is God's name. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. God's praise endures forever."**

Ask God to renew your heart by praising God. Gratefully worship God with your family of faith, a community of support and accountability, where we learn from each other and get inspiration from each other. Be an awe gatherer, blessing keeper, and gratitude maker.

Praise God for creation. Praise God for grace. Praise God for food. At the Credo conference we were encouraged to mindfully eat. Begin your meal by thanking God for your health. After each bite put your utensil down. Praise God for taste and texture. Praise God for the colors and smells. Praise God for the hot, cold, and warmth. Praise God for the variety. Praise God for the creativity, the assortment, and the uniqueness. Praise God for the way the food will nourish you giving you energy to love. Praise God for the people who care for the land, farm the food, transport it, clean it, prepare it and serve it. Praise God for the people sharing the meal with you. Praise God for the firm earth, the floor, chair, table, plate and glasses. Praise God for the room, light, art, music, temperature control. Praise God with every bite. Whenever I mindfully eat, God puts a new heart within me.

Praise God for redemption, resurrection, renovation and rest. Praise God for healing you and others. Praise God for mending relationships. Praise God for liberating us from all that seeks to hold us captive. Praise God for the covenant God made with us, a resolute, enduring, ever sure promise to love us, save us and enjoy each other in glory for eternity.

I praise God for family, rock climbing, 80's music, bicycling, cookie dough, cross country skiing, mountains, tennis, books, soccer, sunrises and sunsets, trees, waterfalls, snow for that which nourishes me with wonder. What fills you with wonder? How do you praise God?

Ask God to renew your heart by believing God has the power to set you free from all that limits you, setting you free to abundant joy and infinite love.

A disciple asked, "Holy one, what is the difference between knowledge and wisdom?" He replied, "When you have knowledge you use a torch to show the way. When you are wise you become the torch." Receive the new heart God is eager to give you and you will shine, lighting the way for yourself and others.

Suzanne Meyer wrote, "Suddenly the sky over and in some way around me, as I was on a small hill, was all afire. The glory of the sunset was perhaps reflected in the myriads of particles of powdery sand still floating in the air. I was caught in limitless beauty and radiant singing splendor. And, at the same time, I knew that all this beauty was created, I knew God. My heart knew that all was from God and God alone." God will put a new heart in all of us. Amen.