

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania, VA
To be delivered on March 26, 2016	On the occasion of the Great Vigil of Easter

### A New Heart of Flesh

Have you ever had a change of heart? Have you ever come to see something, or someone, differently? Maybe you received new information. Perhaps your life experience changed you in some way, taught you some surprising lesson. Maybe you have just lived long enough to have a different perspective than you did in the past. Whatever the cause, a change of heart can be dramatic. It can change more than just one's attitude or opinion. It can change the course of your life. Having a change of heart can be like having a whole new life.

When God first gave his Word to his People, it was written on stone tablets. You remember those stone tablets that Moses brought down from Mount Sinai? That Word, often called the Torah, or Law, defined the Covenant between God and God's People. That Word on those stone tablets was God's way of showing how important his People were to him, and how much he loved them. That Word became the heart of God's People. They lived those words. They revered, worshipped, and cherished those words. They taught them to their children. But still people turned away from his Word. They rejected God and this special relationship with him. They hardened their hearts toward God. So the prophets tried through their preaching to call the People back to this special covenant relationship with God. All too often, the truth that the prophets proclaimed was rejected, and the prophets themselves were rejected. They were mistreated, and sometimes killed.

Finally God tried one last thing to call his People into a special relationship with him. He sent his Son. Jesus didn't teach anything new or different from those stone tablets. In fact he said that he didn't come to abolish that Torah, but to fulfill it. He summed it up this way, "Love

the Lord you God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. And love your neighbor as yourself.” The twist that Jesus put on all of this was in the answer to the question, “Who is my neighbor?” He taught that your neighbor was not defined by tribe or nationality. It was not a matter of race, economic status, gender, or even religion. Your neighbor is anyone who bears the image of God. That is to say, everyone. Jesus taught that you can give the coin that bears Caesar’s image to Caesar, but that you should give to God the heart that bears God’s image.

This may not have been a new teaching exactly, but it was a radical new interpretation of the Torah. In the past, the Torah had been seen as a thing that separated God’s People from everyone else. We heard it this evening, how God was in the business of separating things. In creation he placed a dome in the sky to separate the waters above from the waters below and create space for life. He separated the waters from the dry land. He separated the darkness from the light, the night from the day. And in the story about Israel’s deliverance at the Red Sea, God separated the Israelites from the Egyptians with a pillar of cloud. Then he separated the waters of the Red Sea to create a way to save their life. From those formative stories and through the stone tablets, God’s Word was seen as something that separated—separated good from evil, separated light from dark, separated life from death. That story about the Red Sea... it meant life for the Israelites, but death for the Egyptians.

Jesus’ ministry was in some ways the opposite of the ministry of separation. Jesus’ ministry was a ministry of reconciliation—reconciling brother to brother, reconciling nation to nation, reconciling humanity to God. Still there were those hardened hearts to deal with. So Jesus did the most radical thing. He got himself killed. Rather than fight to save his People, Jesus died so that we might live. The crucifixion changed everything. No longer was God’s

Law of separation carved in stone, but God's Law of love was written in the flesh of Jesus. He showed us on his cross what it meant truly to love. He showed us that our neighbors include everyone who suffers, or is persecuted, or is outcast. Real love bears one another's pain. Real love sacrifices itself for the good of the other. Real love willingly submits itself to serve as the lowest of the low. Real love even redefines our relationships of kinship and friendship; it reorganizes how we see the world, as far as who is 'in' and who is 'out'.

There is a passage from the Talmud, an ancient rabbinic commentary and teaching on the Torah. It talks about that scene at the Red Sea. Remember, we just heard it this evening. After the Israelites make it through the Red Sea safely to the other side, and the Egyptian army is pursuing them, then God allows the water to come back together and drown the Egyptians, thereby saving the Israelites. Remember how Moses and the Israelites sing as they see their Egyptian oppressors dead on the sea shore? "Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea." Well, the story in the Talmud, which is often quoted at the Passover, tells how in heaven, when they saw how God triumphed over the Egyptians, the angels began to sing too. God silenced them, and said, "My creatures are perishing in the sea, and you want to sing?"

That's exactly the kind of twist that Jesus brought to the Torah. And that's exactly how he fulfilled it on the cross. Jesus taught that we should love our enemies, and pray for them, and he prayed while they were crucifying him, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.'<sup>22</sup> But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment," and he turned the other cheek to those who struck him. Jesus taught that when we have seen someone hungry and given him

food, and when we have seen someone thirsty and given her something to drink, and when we have seen a stranger and welcomed her, and someone naked and clothed him, and when we have seen someone who is sick or in prison and visited that person, then we have done it to him, as if we had done it to Jesus himself.

So Jesus and his death on the cross are the ultimate revelation of what it means to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself. For those of us who choose to follow this crucified and resurrected Lord, like James who was baptized this evening, the cross is our change of heart. The cross of Jesus is how God removed our heart of stone and replaced it with a heart of flesh. It is how God sprinkled clean water on us and made us clean. It is how God put God's own spirit within us, and gave us a new life.

We celebrate new life tonight. We celebrate Jesus' resurrection, how God raised him from the dead, and how he will never die again. We celebrate James' new life in Christ in his baptism. We celebrate how each of us has died to sin and been raised to new and eternal life by our baptism into Christ Jesus, our Lord. We celebrate how that new life is not reserved for a chosen few, but is offered to the whole world.

Thank God for our new heart, the heart of Jesus which is able to love even his enemies. Thank God for our new life, our life which is hidden with Christ in God. Thank God for our new Spirit, God's own Holy Spirit which is poured out for us and sustains us to eternal life. Thanks be to God.

Amen.