

**Sermon – “PRAYER FOR A CLEAN HEART”**

**September 20, 2009  
Psalm 51:10-12**

Before the sermon today, I want you to take a moment and play  
NAME THAT TUNE.

Listen to what our organist will play, and if you know what he’s playing,  
hold up your hand.

(Organist plays hymn 956 – “Create in Me”  
Call on someone to ID the tune.)

Ah, yes. If you grew up in my generation, you remember singing that song  
after the Sunday sermon.

The words are straight from the Bible, from Psalm 51.  
We read the words earlier in this service.

They’re also printed out as hymn 956. Please turn there.  
Now let’s sing them. (all sing)

These words are a PRAYER.

**“Create in me a CLEAN HEART, O God.”**

Why this prayer?

What is in these hearts of ours that is in such need of cleansing?

If there were a microphone tuned to pick up the thoughts in our hearts right here  
in church on a Sunday morning, I can imagine that it would record things  
like these...

(VOICES:

Man - “When is this service going to be over with? BORING! I want to  
get home and watch some football...”

Woman - “Can’t they shut those kids up? I can’t hear myself think!  
Why can’t they teach them to sit still...or take them to the nursery?”

Man – “Oh, what a BABE! Gotta check her out. Better be careful so  
my wife doesn’t see me...”

Woman – “Worked my rear end off and nobody said a word...again! I’m not  
going to volunteer for anything else. It’ll serve them right.”

Is it SURPRISING to hear things like that?

Well, certainly to hear it OUT LOUD.

People usually keep such thoughts hidden.

So good are we at hiding things in our hearts  
that we are astonished when the door of a heart finally swings open and  
we see something WICKED revealed there.

It happens on the evening news.

Some awful crime has been committed. Something unspeakably CRUEL.  
A reporter interviews the neighbors, who usually say,  
“I’m SHOCKED! I had no idea...”

It happens sometimes at congregational meetings  
where some sore subject comes up again, and someone finally loses  
his or her patience and burst out something unkind,  
or storms out to the parking lot.

We say, “I’m SHOCKED that he behaved that way!”

To tell the truth,

we can be just as shocked by our own words and deeds.

“Did I really say THAT? Did I really do THAT?”

None of this, however, is surprising to God, who knows the human heart  
better than we humans do!

The Bible tells us that **“The Lord looks on the heart.”**

Jesus knew what was inside people. He summed it up,

**“Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication,  
theft, false witness, blasphemy.”**

Out of the HEART – the UNCLEAN HUMAN HEART!

Picture a large, open pipeline spewing toxic waste into the Willamette River,  
or raw sewage into a pristine lake.

That’s the picture of our human hearts in their natural state...

and the result is a world polluted, choked, dying because of our human SIN.

It’s a pollution problem that dwarfs the mess at Hanford,  
for Hanford, at least, could be cleaned up, given enough time and money  
from the government’s “superfund.”

But how can we clean up the human heart?

It's an impossibly LARGE JOB.

Yet people DO try. Efforts ARE underway!

If left to our own devices, we humans try to cleanse hearts in two ways.

The FIRST is that we try to make other people change by SHEER FORCE.

“CLEAN UP your act!” we demand.

Do you remember mouths washed out with soap?

Beatings with rulers and hickory sticks?

We call for tougher laws...longer prison terms.

Lock them up! Teach them a lesson!

The RESULTS?

In my experience, the use of force can produce some OUTWARD CONFIRMITY, but it does very little to change the heart.

The Pharisees of Jesus' day, who employed tough penalties for misbehavior, were evidence of that.

**“You look good on the outside,”** Jesus told them, **“but inwardly, you are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness.”**

The SECOND approach, regarded as more “enlightened” in our day, is the path of SELF-HELP.

Buy a book. Take a course. Use your willpower.

Every New Year's Eve, there are lots of resolutions made by well-meaning people who seriously want to do better.

The abusive husband who vows to his wife that he won't do it any more.

The alcoholic who promises to “stop drinking once and for all.”

The RESULTS?

Some changes, some initial excitement, almost always temporary.

Followed by a relapse, a return to old habits, and very often, DESPAIR.

Has it happened to you?

Such is the strength, the stubborn power, of the UNCLEAN HEART.

**“Wretched man that I am,”** wrote Paul. **“Who will deliver me from this body of death?”**

NOT stronger laws! Not big doses of willpower.

ONLY GOD can cleanse the human heart.

Hence the Psalmist’s urgent prayer:

“God, I CANNOT. YOU must do this in me.

Please, YOU create in me a clean heart, or I will die in these sins of mine.”

Here in this place, from this pulpit,

I proclaim the news that **GOD HAS ANSWERED THIS PRAYER.**

He did not draft a new set of laws.

He did not mail us a set of promotional tapes.

He sent a SAVIOR named JESUS

who brought cleansing LOVE from God’s heart to OURS,

who died to pay the price for every sinning heart.

Here’s the promise for all who entrust their lives to Him:

1 John 1:9 **“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”**

That verse describes God’s two-stage CLEANUP STRATEGY.

First – FORGIVENESS

Second – CLEANSING.

Here’s a picture that explains why BOTH are needed:

Imagine a criminal sitting on death row. He is scheduled to be executed tonight for a string of terrible crimes. The prospect of death has sobered him. Frightened him. If only he could start all over!

At five minutes till midnight, there comes word:

**THE GOVERNOR HAS PARDONED HIM!**

He will not die. In fact, the governor has decreed that he should go FREE!

Now what? Having been pardoned, will this man return to his old criminal ways or have a change of heart?

You and I are that CRIMINAL!

Guilty. Doomed.

But now set free by a word of pardon.  
Jesus has taken our place, paid the whole price of our sins.  
FORGIVENESS has been announced to us.

Now what?

Back to our old ways? or will there be a change of heart, a different life?

Hear this Psalm!

It is a prayer that we may find more than FORGIVENESS, precious as that is.  
It is a prayer that we may have truly changed, cleansed HEARTS.

The Psalm uses two words to depict God's two-stage clean-up:  
**CREATE and RENEW**

The word CREATE is the same word used of the world's creation in Genesis.  
When God connects us to Jesus by faith, a truly new heart begins beating,  
a new WILL is born, a new life begun.

But then comes a second word, easy to overlook.  
He RENEWS a right spirit within us.

Just as a new-born baby must be fed, that new heart and life must be nourished.  
The Christian life is not a momentary COLLISION,  
but a continuing COMMUNION.

Not a single hit-and-run CONVERSION,  
but a life-long walk with the Lord.

Not just "**Create in me a clean heart,**" but also "**renew a right spirit**"  
day by day by day.

Renewing a right spirit in us  
is the special job of the HOLY SPIRIT, who is given to us to bring to completion  
that "good work begun."

Let me illustrate.

Years ago at the church I served in Akron, Ohio,  
the congregation had a custodian named Fritz.

Fritz was not your ordinary custodian. he did not come a couple of days  
a week to clean up and then go home.

NO! Fritz lived at the church! Actually right next door in a house  
barely 20 feet away.

Living that close, Fritz could see everything that went on at the church  
building: every wedding, every funeral, every transient who sat on the  
front steps.

Nothing got into that building without Fritz's OK, and every mess was  
cleaned up right away.

God has appointed for your heart and mine a resident CUSTODIAN.

The early Christians, we are told in Acts 2, "**were all filled with the Holy Spirit.**"

So were we all, says 1 Corinthians 12, "**made to drink of that one Spirit.**"

He lives with us to help watch what comes in to these NEW HEARTS, so that  
we may stay clean....have you heard Him sound a warning in your heart  
about what you are watching?  
to whom you are listening?  
what you are saying?

And when you make a mess of things, He is right there to summon you to your knees  
to find again the daily CLEANSING you need.

He even puts words in our mouths. To speak. To sing. To pray.  
These very words...the words of this lovely psalm.

As we speak them, He Himself will be at work.

Let us make these words our prayer once more this morning. Bow your heads and pray  
them with me:

**Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.**

**Cast me not away from thy presence, and take not thy Holy Spirit from me.**

**Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation, and uphold me with Thy free Spirit.**

**Amen!**