

First Presbyterian Church  
Cheyenne, Wyoming  
September 25, 2011  
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: The Desires of Our Hearts

Exodus 20: 1-20, Philippians 3:4b-14, Matthew 21: 33-46

What are the desires of our hearts? The phrase, “desires of our hearts” is a word combination that can raise all sorts of images in our minds. The word desire, itself, means “a longing or to long for, a craving or to crave for something that brings satisfaction or enjoyment. Desire can be an expressed wish or a request.” Desire is a word that often expresses what is in our hearts and minds. Desire is used in some form 211 times in the Bible, so it has importance in our book of faith. Desire is also a word that describes a feeling God built into us, our hearts and minds to be used for our good. Are the desires of our hearts today the ones God built in or have we replaced God’s with our own?

I would propose to you that the good desires of God for our hearts is implied in each of the Ten Commandments we heard read from Exodus 20. If we take the word and feeling of desire and apply it to the Ten Commandments in a positive way, then we are to desire: To love, and serve only the one true living God: To worship only the one true living God in spirit and truth: To use God’s name to tell and live the truth and nothing but the truth: To rest on the seventh day just as God rests: To honor and care for our parents in every way possible as long as they live: To respect all of human life because we all belong to the God we desire to love and serve: To always remain absolutely faithful to our husbands or wives: To respect others property and be trustworthy with it: To tell only the truth about our neighbors in court and everywhere else so that reality is not distorted, and innocent lives are not destroyed: To focus the one supreme and legitimate desires of our heart, soul and mind on doing the will and purposes of the one and only true living God: So that, no things, persons or other desires of our hearts distract us from being obedient and loyal to God. Now this is using the gift of desire God has given us and the desires of God for good. (TNIBC Vol. 1, pg. 846).

Unfortunately, since our first sinful act in the Garden of Eden, we human beings have taken the good word or feeling gift from God known as desire, and turned it into the word or feeling to “covet.” Covet can be defined: “as to desire wrongfully, inordinately, or without due regard for the rights of others: to covet another's property.” If one examines the Ten Commandments carefully, one can see that to covet or “to desire wrongfully” is involved in each of the commandments in some manner. Take the first three commandments for example. They could be written to say: “Do not covet or desire wrongfully to be your own god, or create your own gods or use God’s name to try to lift yourself above God. To covet or desire wrongfully is behind the commandments not to steal, lie, commit adultery, or murder. The tenth commandment especially lifts up the word and deed of covet and sums up the commandments to me: “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.” All

this “coveting or wrongful desires” of our heart began in the first human sin so long ago in that Garden of Eden.

In light of the “coveting or wrongful desires” of our heart that we have seen lately in the manipulations of the markets, ponzi schemes, major deceptions in the mortgage world, foolish political posturing, irresponsible use of credit cards and home equity loans, disregard of the environment, destructive wars and other corrupt practices we can only guess at, I can see how Jesus’ parable from Matthew 21 can apply to today. God, the owner and creator of the vineyard, or of the whole universe has “leased” the creation to humanity. God, the landlord must be outraged at our recent behavior as his tenants.

The “truth tellers” or Christ figures he has sent to correct us have been ignored, stoned or killed, at least figuratively, many times over because they were getting in the way of the “coveting or wrongful desires” of humanity’s hearts. Too many of us humans have tried to take over what belongs to God and have made a mess of this marvelous creation of God. Our monetary, political, ethical, religious, employment and environmental issues are really spiritual problems. In short, the spiritual problems are that: Too often, humanity follows the wrongful coveting desires of its hearts by trying to displace the one true living God with its own creations and its own ego. As humans, WE desire to be the landlord and attempt to make God the tenant or worse, the slave. And, woe are we, for as in the parable, God just might replace us at any time with people who will produce fruits of God’s kingdom.

Yet, there is still hope! I would not be standing before you as a minister of Christ’s Good News if there was not hope. There is still time for us to become the people to whom God leases the vineyard and “who will give him the produce at the harvest time.”

Let me tell you two stories of hope because of what God has done in Jesus Christ to redeem us from our enslavement to “coveting or wrongful desires” of our heart. When I was thirteen, I noticed how often my grandfather looked at the gold pocket watch he had chained to his belt loop. I thought this was pretty cool. I decided I wanted a pocket watch, too. So I often put in my verbal and written request to my parents for a pocket watch to be given to me on the Christmas of 1960. Christmas morning came and the family tradition was to take turns opening one present at a time. It was my brother Doug’s turn and out of his sock he pulled a pocket watch. Instead of being happy for him, I grabbed it and said, “I was supposed to get this,” implying that my parents had erred and my “punk” brother (who is now a Presbyterian minister) didn’t deserve it. I was like Gollum and his precious ring in the Lord of the Rings trilogy. My mother looked deeply grieved but held her tongue. My father, who was six foot-two and two hundred pounds of muscle, with great pain in his eyes, yet calmness in his voice, told me to look in my Christmas sock. There was the gift of a pocket watch, which I had not really earned nor now deserved, but was given in love anyway. Over a simple pocket watch, I deserved to have my “clock cleaned.” The shame of my actions and the calm forgiveness and grace given by my parents still bring tears to my eyes.

Seven months later, I had turned 14 and was at the New Wilmington Missionary Conference in New Wilmington, PA. A blind Presbyterian minister named Byron Cozier was speaking at the boy’s vespers. As he spoke about repenting of our sins and

accepting Jesus Christ as our Lord, it was as if his blind eyes were looking straight into my eyes and penetrating the depth of my blind soul. Through Byron Cozier, the Holy Spirit overwhelmed my ego to cause me to confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. I read the whole Bible that year. Thus began a transforming spiritual journey I'm still on.

I realize now, despite the total depravity of the "coveting or wrongful desires" of my heart as clearly seen in my grabbing of the pocket watch; God in Jesus Christ worked through my parents, Byron Crozier, the Bible and the Holy Spirit to begin to transform the desires of my heart to become more like the desires of God's heart. God is still working hard on me in this spiritual journey. Some days it is a difficult process for both God and me. But thanks be to God in Jesus Christ, there is still hope for me. If there is hope for me, there is certainly more than enough hope for everyone else.

Another person, his story and writings of hope have had a very positive effect on the desires of my heart. This person is the Apostle Paul and the passage he wrote in Philippians 3:4b-14, our Epistle lesson for today. If you recall, Paul was once named Saul, the super proud legalistic Pharisee, and persecutor and killer of early Christians who coveted power over people's lives. Unexpectedly, with transforming power, Jesus came to him in a vision, knocked him down, asked him why he was persecuting him, blinded Paul for three days, and transformed the wrongful desires of his heart to become the desires of Christ's heart. Paul also often remembered the shame of his previous actions and the amazing grace God showed in forgiving him.

I love how Paul writes about the transformation in the desires of his heart. Let us hear again his words. "Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith." Then Paul writes of the new and God-like desire of his heart. "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.... I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus." What a transformation of the desires of the heart that God worked in him. What a wonderful hope of new life in Christ Paul has expressed and eventually lived. Paul went on to be the greatest Christian missionary ever spreading the desires of Christ's heart in word or deed. As a result, billions in this world also came to faith in Jesus Christ and have pressed "on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus." What wonderful hope he has passed on to us.

May the same hope-filled grace of God in Jesus Christ also cause this totally depraved world to give up the "coveting or wrongful desires" of the heart; and toss away its "coveting, greedy, slothful and self serving ways" as rubbish; in order that it "may gain the surpassing value of knowing and desiring Christ Jesus as its Lord." One word for the rubbish or accumulation of "coveting or wrongful desires" that our world needs to get rid of has been lifted up by the Rev. Adam Hamilton in his book, Enough: Discovering Joy Through Simplicity and Generosity. The word for the rubbish is

“Affluenza,” that has infected not only individuals but also institutions and nations. “A program on the Public Broadcasting Station defined ‘affluenza’ this way: **Affluenza:** 1. The bloated, sluggish, and unfulfilled feeling that results from efforts to keep up with the Joneses. 2. An epidemic of stress, overwork, waste, and indebtedness caused by dogged pursuit of the American Dream. 3. An unsustainable addiction to economic growth.” The world needs to dump this rubbish desire of our hearts and replace it with what Paul did and many of us have: the “surpassing value of knowing and desiring Christ Jesus as its Lord” and making its goal “the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus and sharing him with others.”

This does not mean we do away with money and our material goods, but it means we examine the present desires of our heart, and how we use the money and the goods of this world. These desires of our heart show up in where we place our faith and how we use our money, material goods, time, and talents; how we treat our fellow human beings, ourselves and the vineyard God has given us to care for now and in the future. Are the desires of our hearts and uses of all God, the good vineyard owner, has given us consistent with value of knowing and desiring Christ Jesus as our Lord. Is our goal in life “the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus?” Are we living out God’s purposes for our lives as expressed in the Ten Commandments? If the desires of our hearts and the lifestyle we live are not according to God’s ways, then as you have heard, there is still hope for us to be transformed—transformed by the power of God’s amazing grace in Jesus Christ. It may be a transformation imposed upon us for our own good. If the desires of your heart and your way of life are in accord with knowing Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and his call to us; then may God bless you and cause you to help lead us and the world in the transforming ways of the Lord.