

“The Heart of the Matter”

Jeremiah 31:31-34

One of the founders of Paypal, the company that specializes in ways to make payments online, was interviewed on NPR the other day. He was talking about a new service the company offers. Let's say you have a college student in your family and that this student needs some money in a hurry (and what college student doesn't?). All he or she has to do, assuming you are willing, is send a text message to your cell phone with the words: “need money.” And from your cell phone, you can transfer money from your Paypal account directly into your student's account instantaneously. Done!

My first reaction upon hearing this was to marvel at the wonders of technology. My second was to feel grateful that we are long past the college years for our own children. At least in the past they had to call and talk for a while before asking for money.

The technology we live with in today's world is truly amazing. If you have the right gadgets you can do just about anything from just about anywhere. Everything is at our fingertips. If you are connected to the World Wide Web, there is hardly anything you can't find. Reference books and encyclopedias are no longer needed. Now to make a giant leap, wouldn't it be neat if there were some sort of equivalent high tech system of streamlining and shortcuts in the area of faith and spirituality, something to take some of the effort out of it and make it all more accessible and user friendly, let's say?

I'm not referring here to electronic concordances where you can type in a word and find every instance of it in the Bible. That is pretty neat, I have to admit. The one I use has made my huge, *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance* (emphasis on exhaustive) obsolete. But that's not what I'm talking about. Rather, what I have in mind is a high tech streamlined way to live our lives in the way that we ought to. Is there anything to make Christian living more simple? Well, maybe there is. As a matter of fact, I can think of a couple of examples of streamlining in the field of religion.

First, there is Jesus' summary of the law. It is generally accepted that in the Jewish law there were 613 separate, distinct commandments. That is a lot of commandments to keep track of. Jesus comes along and says that all the law and the prophets can be summed up in two commandments: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind. That is the first and the greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. And just like that Jesus, in effect, made obsolete all of the 613 nit picky laws having to do with ritual cleanliness, observance of the Sabbath, and so on. Jesus indicated that if you truly loved God with all your heart and that if you truly loved your neighbor as yourself, you have fulfilled all the laws.

Another example of streamlining and condensing goes back even before Jesus, that comes right from the Jewish scriptures. It is a beautiful vision from the prophet Jeremiah, who was writing in about the sixth century before Christ during the time of Israel's exile and captivity. These words come in a section of Jeremiah that is called, by the scholars, the “Little Book of Comfort.” This is what Jeremiah says:

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

What a beautiful vision the prophet had. He envisioned a day when the law would be written not on stone tablets, but on the heart, implanted in our being. In Deuteronomy the people of Israel are commanded to recite the words of the law to their children, to talk about them when they are at home and when they are away, when they lie down and when they rise, and to bind them as a sign on their hand, to fix them as an emblem on their forehead and to write them on the doorposts of their houses and their gates.

Several weeks ago at a gathering of clergy here in Auburn, we met with the gentleman who is planning to build the Kosher cheese plant and one of the orthodox rabbis who will be part of the inspection team of rabbis and rabbinical students. I noticed that hanging from his robe he had the little boxes, the phylacteries, that are part of the traditional orthodox Jewish dress. What Jeremiah envisioned was something that got the words of God even closer than the clothes we wear. He envisioned the words of God being written upon the heart. This is a real advancement. What it says to me is that it's got to be in here. Our faith, our religion, if it is going to be real, has to be in a certain sense, instinctual. When we are presented with a situation in our lives where we have to make a choice, we don't have to go look something up in the Bible. The answer is within.

The psychologist Rollo May gives a hypothetical example in one of his books, to illustrate a point he was making that is different from mine. But I think the example may prove to be helpful. While walking down the street, Mr. Smith, let us say, sees an old man collapse over the curb and lie in danger of being struck by traffic. Mr. Smith may do one of several things. He may say to himself, "I don't know this man; therefore I have no responsibility, and I'll let someone else pick him up." Rollo May calls this an egocentric response.

But let's say that Mr. Smith is a cultivated individual, says May. In this case, he may say to himself, "Some of these bystanders may know me; if I don't go to this man's rescue they will think me a poor fellow." In this case Mr. Smith goes to the man's aid, which is good, but he does so still out of an egocentric motivation. Rollo May suggests that "most social morality...falls into this realm of social prestige."

But now let us assume that Mr. Smith is a moral person. In this case he might reason this way in his mind: "I believe that I should do unto others as I would have them do unto me. If I don't help this fellow I'll have a troubled conscience." This response, says Rollo May, would be applauded by and large in our culture. And yet it is still egocentric. Mr. Smith is still concerned with *his* morality and how *he* will feel about it afterwards. May suggests that he has not overcome his egocentricity but merely removed it to the more subtle, pharisaic level.

He suggests a fourth alternative. "...suppose that at this moment Mr. Smith is aware only of one thing – here is a human being fallen over the curb. A fellow-man is in need. He will be struck by a car and his bones broken if something is not done. Through empathy Mr. Smith may feel in himself the pain and tragedy which will occur if the man is not helped. So he steps to the curb, lifts the old man, carries him into a drugstore, and calls the attendants to administer aid." In this case Mr. Smith has *responded* to a need. "For a moment he has forgotten himself." (*Springs of Creative Living*, p. 213) Now of course, as far as the man who fell is concerned, none of this matters. He doesn't care what Mr. Smith's motivation is. But to Mr. Smith it does make a difference.

Two weeks ago on Tuesday, a 33 year old actor from Michigan named Chad Lindsey was waiting for the C train in New York City when he saw another man who had gone too close to the tracks, lost his balance, fell and hit his head on one of the rails and passed out. Mr. Lindsey dropped his bag and jumped down onto the tracks. He sensed that a train would be coming very shortly because of how crowded the platform was. He pulled the man to safety.

But by the time emergency aid arrive, he had slipped away and taken another subway train. It was only later that a friend of his called a reporter to tell him who it was.

In this case we could probably safely say that Chad Lindsey acted in the last way, he responded, and for a moment he forgot himself. All he saw was that someone just like him was in trouble, and he acted. It seems to me that it is something like that that Jeremiah had in mind – acting from some signals that come from the heart. Mr. Lindsey didn't have time to consider his reasons or to think about whatever religious or moral obligations that might have been drilled into him. He just acted. Whether or not Mr. Lindsey is a Christian, he acted in the way that Jesus would have us act. He lived out at least the second of the two great commandments by loving his neighbor as himself, and in a way, forgetting himself. The law of God not as a list of dos and don'ts, but something in the heart, an instinctual response.

In Abraham Lincoln's first inaugural address, in his closing paragraph he makes a plea for unity in the nation, for bonds of affection and he speaks about "the better angels of our nature," which again sounds a lot like what Jeremiah was talking about.

We are in the midst of March Madness, the NCAA basketball tournament. A few of us here this morning are feeling pretty good. The rest of us don't want to talk about it. Many times, watching some of these very talented basketball players making their very athletic moves, one or another of the announcers will make the comment that what that basketball player just did "can't be taught." And, of course, what I think they mean by that is that this player just has some natural talent. There is a sense in which what Jesus is talking about and what Jeremiah is talking about is something that cannot be taught as well.

Westminster currently has a confirmation class made up of some great kids. Rob and Linda Russell with help from Jill and me and a mentor for each of the students, are trying to cram the heads of these poor kids with all sorts of information about the Presbyterian Church, the sacraments, the Reformation, Calvin, Zwingli, Knox, the Bible, creeds and confessions, mission, stewardship, evangelism, and a lot more. All of this is important if these young people are going to become members of the church. It is all useful information.

But someone said once that Christianity cannot be taught, that it must be caught. And when you get right down to it, it is not information that makes us Christian. It is something in the heart. What we ultimately hope for these young people is that they will have it in their hearts. What we hope for these young people is exactly what Jeremiah was talking about:

I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.