

## **“Spiritual Exercise: Getting A New Heart and Spirit”**

Proper 21-A September 28, 2008

### **Introduction:**

When I first became a Christian I was 27 years old. I had attended a home Bible Study. The couple hosting the Bible Study owned a diaper service company. Young people today don't know what a diaper service company used to do anymore than they understand having milk delivered to your back door. Anyway, I later thought how appropriate it was that God saved me in a home owned by a couple who cleaned diapers for a living. I needed a lot of cleaning-up.

We're trying to raise our children in church and model for them a lifestyle that shows them how much we depend on God's guidance for the decisions we need to make – such as accepting this call to be your Rector; providing a job for Shannon in Winter Haven; selling our house in Winter Garden and finding the right house here. In one sense getting saved that Monday night was very difficult. Getting me to that house in a state of mind where I knew I needed to find God was a miracle. Allowing the woman who led the Bible Study to pray with me asking God to forgive me of my sin; and to invite Jesus into my life was a major miracle. But all of that was relatively easy compared to the daily challenges of living a life that reflects having Christ in my life. The daily effort of living like I am a born again

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Christian is harder work than getting saved. A new born baby struggles to be born and some of them look like they were in a fight right after they arrive. But the real work of birthing them belongs to the mother, supported by the doctors, nurses, midwives, and sometimes husbands.

Likewise it is harder to take personal responsibility for our spiritual lives than it was to become a Christian. I am less interested in helping these kids become Episcopalians than in becoming true disciples of Jesus Christ. It is ultimately more important that they know how to pray, how to worship and how to develop a daily life of study, prayer and service than it is to find Rite 2, Eucharistic Prayer B in the Book of Common Prayer. I am not anti-Episcopalian – and all the Vestry said ... Amen! I just don't think that will be the measurement when we stand before God's throne on judgment day. "Are there any Episcopalians in line out there? O, good. Come on in. The rest of you sinners will just have to wait until I process these religiously pure people first."

That was the point from today's Gospel lesson. The religious people – the chief priests and elders – thought they already were in good standing with God because of their religion. Therefore, they totally did not understand the spiritual authority Jesus had; and, they really did not 'get it'

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that tax collectors and prostitutes were going to enter Heaven before them.

In today's lessons we hear a call from God through the prophet Ezekiel to *"get yourself a new heart and a new spirit"*. Paul's letter to the Philippians he has this instruction: *"Work out your own salvation with Fear and trembling."* From our Psalm we read: *"Show me your ways, O Lord and teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth and teach me"* (25:3-4). These verses are a

### **Call To Personal Spiritual Responsibility:**

Ephesians 2:8 - 10, reads: *"For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that is not of yourself, it is the gift of God lest anyone should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them."* The point of those verses is to let us know we are saved by God's grace from our sin for good works. But, how do we grow-up enough so we are able to do God's work? That is the responsibility we are to take for our spiritual growth.

Acquiring a new heart and spirit is taking on the mind of Christ who gave up his heavenly privileges in order to serve us. We don't acquire a new heart and spirit by going to the heart and spirit store. Ultimately, it is God who is able to create in us new hearts and bring our spirits back alive.

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God does this as part of saving us. Creating in us new hearts and spirits is a work of the Holy Spirit, but God does it through our cooperation and effort. This is also

### **The Lesson From Philippians:**

In our lesson from Paul's letter to the Philippians he has this instruction: "*Work out your own salvation with Fear and trembling.*" The Greek word translated, "work out" is not a passive word. It requires action on our part. It is the same root from which the word 'gymnasium' comes. Gyms are not intended to be passive places. They are suppose to be places where people go to exercise – to work out – to strengthen themselves – to sweat themselves into shape. So, what is Paul saying? What does it mean to work out my salvation with fear and trembling?

I can't work out unless I am committed to it. My heart has to be in it if I am going to acquire the discipline needed to get into shape. Often, the motivation for working out is fear-based. We are afraid because we've received a bad medical report and our doctor says: "Work out or check-out!" Sometimes, the fear is that we are losing our attractiveness and we are motivated to do what is necessary to look better. Sometimes, there is a coach yelling at us, "One more Time!"

I have a fear of standing before the Lord on

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judgment day and not hearing “Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into your eternal reward.” Whatever motivates us, we need to cultivate the discipline and the habits of spiritual exercise. I think there are two motivations God has for us to spiritually work out. One is for our benefit, the second is for other people. As we work out we become a better human being. As we become a better human being we are better able to help someone else.

### **The Lesson From Ezekiel:**

The prophet Ezekiel presents God’s worldview. It goes like this: All human lives belong to God. And it is God’s design that no human lives be lost from God. Yet, people sin and the end result of sin (not forgiven) is death. In our sinful condition, we complain against God that His way is not fair. So, God reasons with us that if people who know better sin anyway what is unfair about death being their end result; and, if people who are sinners come to their senses and begin doing what is right they will save their souls. What is unfair about that? We humans grouse against God because our standard of right and wrong is different than God’s.

We tend not to measure sin against the same absolute standards of behavior that God does. We determine who a sinner is by looking around and seeing who

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is a worse person than we are. We think that person deserves to die, but a good God will surely recognize that I am, essentially, a good person and deserve to live. Ezekiel says this is backwards thinking. From God's perspective we are all sinners in need of grace, in need of a savior. And, God has accommodated us. God judges all our actions and the motivations and intentions behind our actions. For example, Jesus said to even think murder is to be guilty of it. We all sin and the penalty for sin is spiritual death. It is my Doctor telling me: "Your lifestyle is killing you. You must change your life so you can live."

God says: *"Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit"*. This we get through spiritual exercise. One exercise is to take full advantage of the grace God is offering us as we come to Communion today. Let's grab hold of our sins and bring them to the communion rail. There, open our hands and let Jesus take our stuff from us and let Him give us his grace and forgiveness. Then, let's receive him as we receive his body and blood.

*Show me your ways, O Lord and teach me your paths.*