

The Heart of the Matter ... [or “The Pulse of Life”]
[having everyone check their pulse] **[#1]**

We’re going to spend some time this morning painting a picture... forming an image in our minds because sometimes this helps us grasp concepts that are easily forgotten or perhaps difficult to grasp. Our image this morning represents not only all of us but every person who has ever lived or ever will... it is an image that I think represents us all. I want to do something here as we begin this morning that may seem a little odd. I want to start at the end of the story... take you to the finish line so to speak and then back up to the beginning. I want to do this because I believe this will give us all a better vision or understanding of where we’re going. So turn with me to Acts 22. **[#2 blank]**

Acts 22:1-10

In these verses from Acts 22, we see Paul recounting his conversion to Christianity to an angry mob apparently in Jerusalem. Paul’s conversion takes place in Acts 9, but here he tells his story. He was struck by the glory of God on the road to Damascus – a place he was going in order to reign terror on the followers of Jesus. Here he calls those followers and that movement “the Way.” In that moment face to face with the Lord Jesus Christ and in his life that followed, Paul opened up and surrendered the deepest places in his life... gave up everything to follow this Jesus who had saved him in such a dramatic way. And he did that by asking two questions **[#3]** that we’ll look at in detail later. See them in the text now however, “who are you, Lord?” and “what do you want me to do?” **[#4]** So often, in the courtroom of life, we want to be the judge, the jury, the defense attorney, the prosecuting attorney, perhaps even the bailiff keeping order. But our duty... our role is only to be the witness, and this is what Paul is doing here. Opening his heart...

In the early days of New Century Church, we had some regular skits on stage and I developed a character named Harvey.

Harvey was a “hobo clown” – something like Emmet Kelly’s character “Weary Willie” based on the hobos of the Depression Era. Harvey didn’t speak during any of his skits, he didn’t sing, he didn’t dance, he did nothing profound, but he had something that became the focus of each of these skits. Harvey had a big, red heart over the breast pocket on his oversized jacket. And as Harvey, from his park bench, observed life going by – the good, the bad, and the ugly – a magic, hidden, spring-loaded switch would cause his heart to light up and Harvey would stop dead in his tracks, slowly look at his heart, scratch his head and sit down to ponder what he had observed and what his heart was revealing. Next to Harvey on his bench was a big black Bible, and, at the end of each skit, Harvey would find a verse... a heart verse... projected on the screen for the audience to see. Sometimes these encouraged him, sometimes they gave him insight into the world of sin around him, or perhaps revealed some insight about the condition of his own heart.

What happened in these skits figuratively to Harvey happened literally to Paul and it is God’s desire that it happen to each of us as well. He had a change of heart that radically changed his perspective, his outlook, and his very life.

So, our time today will find us in God’s word thinking, not about Harvey’s heart, but about our own... and my own. **[#5 show title]** Because this is where God does His business in each one of us. This is where Paul himself did his “business” so to speak, with God and God did His “business” with Paul. Now, we know today with our modern medical knowledge that the heart is a muscle – the hardest working muscle in the human body. But to the writers of both the Old and New Testament, this thumping inside the chest that every human being is aware of, “came to stand for the human being’s entire mental and moral activity, both the rational and the emotional elements. In other words, the heart is used figuratively for the hidden springs of the personal life.” (Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words)

Just listen...

[#6] Keep/guard your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life. (Proverbs 4:23) Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. (Psalm 19:14) As in water face reflects face, so the heart of man reflects the man. (Proverbs 27:19) But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, “Why do you think evil in your hearts? (Matthew 9:4) “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. (Matthew 5:8) No references, as far as I can tell, to heartburn, heart attacks, or any other literal use of the muscle inside your chest.

This deep and abiding place is a precious place and a tender place.

If you were ever a fan of the television show “Hee Haw,” you may recall those skits that showed up periodically where String Bean Akeman would be sharing stories with the cast all gathered around him. Junior Samples would say “have ye heard from home lately, String?” To which String would reply, “yep I got a letter from home just this week... I’ve got it right here, next to my heart.”

This deep and abiding place is a precious place and a tender place.

According to the Bible dictionaries, handbooks, and concordances I’ve looked at, the Hebrew (OT) and Greek (NT) words translated “heart” occur over 1,000 times “making it the most common anthropological or human term in Scripture.” (Biblestudytools.com/dictionary/heart)

[#7] I would suggest that there is perhaps no more recognizable image among all cultures, all people and people groups, and throughout all time. Conduct a search of the most iconic logos of all time and you will find the golden arches of McDonalds, Coca Cola, the Nike Swoosh, Mercedes Benz, the ears of Mickey Mouse. But none of these carry the weight,

none of them has a history, going back to antiquity like the image of the heart... perhaps not as perfect in shape as this one, but the heart image nonetheless. Even in the most ancient of cultures, when spotting the cave woman of your dreams or fleeing for your life from some predator... that pulsating, beating, throbbing in your chest responded. [#8 blank]

On mission trips to Spanish-speaking countries, we would say... *Christo vive en mi corazon!* Christ lives in my heart! *Recibo Christo en mi corazon!* I receive Christ into my heart!

As I said earlier, most importantly for our study today, the heart is spoken of in Scripture as the center of all moral and spiritual life. The conscience is often associated with the heart. In the Hebrew language, there is no word for conscience, so to express this idea, the word “heart” is often used. Job said “my heart shall not reproach me as long as I live.” (Job 27:6) The true nature of a person is contrasted with just the superficial, outward appearance. (1 Samuel 16:7) But the LORD said to Samuel, “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.” The heart is the field where the seed of the Word of God is scattered and sown. (Matt 13:19)

And how interesting it is that in the Bible, it is not only the sphere of Divine influence, but sin has its seat in this center of man’s inward life as well, in the heart.

Listen again...

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? (Jer 17:9) But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. (Ro 2:5)

Once again, this is where God has chosen to do his business with those He loves passionately... every one of us.

It is very easy in our modern culture to read these expressions and think “well, we know better than that today.” Oh, really? Then why do we sing the national anthem or recite the pledge of allegiance with our hand over our heart? Why do we beg a friend to provide a favor with the words “come on, have a heart!”? Why do we make a pledge “from the bottom of my heart”? Why do we say “I don’t have the heart to do that, you’re breaking my heart, you’re all heart, you just wear your heart on your sleeve, absence makes the heart grow fonder, I’ve had a change of heart. Why did Tony Bennett sing to audiences world-wide “I left my heart in San Francisco?”

All of this, I believe, is not just a matter of how ancient people saw and understood things. I believe it is how God helps us see and understand things. He knew then and knows now that joy, discouragement, despair, are all emotions, deep within us and spoken of as being centered in the heart. James says that we harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in the heart. Depravity is centered in the heart. Jesus said that out of the heart comes evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander (Matt 15:19) All moral conditions from highest to lowest are centered in a deep place centered within us... the place the Scriptures refer to as the heart.

So, here is the point... listen carefully. We all have a heart... **[#9]** a physical heart and a “central place” where God does business with us. **[#10]** And that heart within us has a throne **[#11]** ... a place of control... a place where decisions are made... good decisions and bad decisions. This is true of everyone... always has been and always will be. And as long as we live without the presence of God within us, guess who sits on the throne? **[#12]**. We make all of the decisions... by default... there is no other choice. This is where Paul was on the Damascus road before coming face to face with the One he would surrender to as his savior.

Jesus said to the church at Laodicea “I stand at the door and knock. **[#13]** If anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come in and have dinner with him. (Rev 3:20). Jesus is speaking to one church, perhaps churches, but it is no stretch of the imagination... no misuse of Scripture... and no taking out of context for us to say this is also an invitation to us from Jesus. He wants to come in and abide... in that central place... with the church and with humans, His greatest creation.

And when we unlock and open the door, inviting Him in to that “heart place” of our inner being, then the picture changes... it looks like this. **[#14]** There is still something that must happen... every hour of every day we must make the decision of who sits on the throne. What do I read... what do I say... how do I respond... what do I think about? Is it Jesus who now resides in my heart, or do I take the throne, reestablish myself “in control or in charge?” **[#15]** We are empowered by the Holy Spirit at the moment we become believers – when we open the door of our heart – to live set apart and sanctified lives. This is God’s desperate desire for us. Our lives, if viewed on a graph or chart should show steady upward trend as we grow, as we are “transformed,” and set aside the things that distract us from Him. And when we fail... through our angry outbursts, our love of the world, the pride of life, lust of the eyes or flesh (1 John 2:15-17) it means that we have pushed Jesus off of the throne and sit there ourselves. It breaks the heart of God. **[#16]** The saddest verse in the Bible, Genesis 6:5, says “the LORD saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time... and his heart was deeply troubled.” I believe it is no stretch to say that he looks at our individual sin – yours and mine – the same way when we follow our own desire and push Jesus off of the throne of our heart. **[#17 blank]**

I think of several examples of this from Scripture. David, “a man after God’s own heart” in a moment of stupidity and weakness, in effect pushes God off of the throne of his heart to

get what he wants... another man's wife. Peter swears that he will follow Jesus anywhere after his encounter with the Messiah and then swears that he never even knew him. Paul, in Romans 7, discusses the frustration of sometimes knowing what to do, but doing the opposite. God is doing business in the heart of each of these... and at least at some moments, they wrestle back onto the throne.

Don't we do the same? Aren't we just as guilty?

So now, with this image in our minds, let's, let's look again at Acts 22. As we read these verses again, you may immediately think, "heart" is not mentioned here at all! And you're right, it isn't. Paul reveals here, however, that He asked God two questions that we referred to earlier which I propose are the two most important questions anyone then or now can ask. "Who are you, Lord?" "What should I do?" If these are not questions of the heart, as the heart is defined for us in scripture and as we have looked at this morning, I don't know what are.

Acts 22:1-10 again

Think about Paul and his testimony here before an angry mob that (in vs 22) said "wipe this man off the face of the earth – it is a disgrace for him to live." (MSG "he is an insect... stomp on him!") In asking these two questions, turning away from all he has known in his past, he reveals before God his own deep and abiding place... the center of his moral and spiritual life... in essence, his conscience... the true nature of himself... a place closely associated with his mind, will, emotions... the deepest essence of who he is. Paul opens up before the one who reveals Himself that "central place" where God does business with Paul and with each one of us. **[#18]**

Question #1... "Who Are You, Lord?"

We read in Philippians - authored by Paul from a nasty Roman prison cell and his most warm and personal letter – that he came to know Jesus as the joy of his life. Paul knew Jesus as

the image/representation of God on earth... a perfect copy of the original. The one who represented the “fullness” of God. Paul knew Jesus as the one who created all things on earth and in heaven. Paul knew Jesus as the ultimate authority over all thrones, rulers, and powers. The one who holds everything together. The one who is before all things... eternal. The one who is the head of the body... the church. The one who is supreme.

The answer to this first question is vital and life-altering. If you consider eternity... and eternal existence without God (death) and eternal existence with God (life), then it is literally a life and death question. There is, I would propose to you, no more important question.

That may be the question this morning for you as it was for Paul. Because knowing Jesus, believing in Him, inviting Him into that heart place of your life, placing your trust and eternal hope in Him is a “life or death” question... this morning.... For you.

Question #2... “What Should I Do?”

Again, we can look at Paul’s later writings to find his answer to this question. In the opening portion of his letter to the Galatians, Paul says that “God set him apart, called him by grace, revealed Jesus to him, so that [here is the purpose] he might preach Him.” to the lost. In many of Paul’s letters, he calls himself an apostle. In using this word, he sees himself as one sent forth, an agent, an authorized representative, an envoy, an ambassador. In essence, this is the purpose for us all... ambassadors and witnesses. God calls each and every one of us for His purposes. This may be the question of the heart for some of us this morning. You see, this question is about the throne. Have you pushed the One who saved you aside in order to accomplish your own heart-felt desire? Is there a plan or a purpose He has for you that you are rejecting? God told Paul to take the step of going to Damascus

and “there you will be told about everything that is assigned for you to do.”

These are questions of the heart... the deepest part of who we are... the control panel of life. **[#19]**

Here, as clearly as I know how to explain it, is the gospel. God gave His son to us because of our desperate need for rescue. Sin has ruined the human race **(Rom 3:23 / All have sinned and come short of the glory of God)** and placed us all under divine condemnation **(Rom 5:18 / the result of one sin was condemnation for all)**. Since we are unable to pay the price justly demanded by God for our sin, our greatest need has always been for a Savior who could pay our sin debt for us **(Rom 6:23 / The wages of sin is death)**. Only Jesus qualified because only Jesus is without sin. He became our redeemer, reconciling us to God **(Rom 5:10 / when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to Him through the death of His son and, having been reconciled, we are saved through His life)**.

Is Jesus there? Have you invited Him in so that He even has the chance to be on the throne which is His rightful place. Who's in charge? Who's on the throne? That's the question. This is the heart of the matter... for you and me... today! Let God have His way... do His business... in that deep place of your life.

[#20] Inside of your worship folder is a red sticker that represents all we have talked about and examined this morning. My challenge to you is at some point in your busy life this week, put it on. That may be when you leave here and go to lunch... perhaps at work one day... at the gym or on the golf course. This should serve us two purposes... looking at it and remembering to check the condition of our own throne room or to engage someone with an encouraging word, a message of hope, or a gospel conversation. Call a friend and invite them to lunch, wearing your heart. I'm guessing and hoping that someone will ask its meaning. You can say “it

reminds me of the dwelling place of God in my life"... or, "I'm trying to remember that the Bible says I should "guard my heart for it is the wellspring of life"... or, "Do you understand what it means to have Jesus, figuratively, living in your heart? Let me tell you."

Let's pray and ask God to help us contemplate our own heart and to give us the words of hope – words of the heart – to share with someone this week.