I once read about a surgery developed by a doctor in South America that was used as a last-chance effort to help people with enlarged hearts. The surgeon figured that if a person's heart was too large and that was affecting its ability to function properly, the logical thing to do would be to reduce the heart's size. So the doctor began the experiment of opening patients' chests and cutting away a piece of each person's heart. It sounds barbaric but it worked. Once it recovered from the trauma of the surgery, in most cases the modified heart repaired itself and went on to function quite normally, giving patients a quality of life they never before dared to hope for. That surgery has since fallen out of favor because of unwanted complications, but sometimes it is still used in extreme cases. Now doctors have developed medications and procedures to reach the same goal of reducing a heart's size without the radical surgery. These are just a few of a multitude of amazing procedures, many of the quite high-tech, designed to regulate the action of that vital part of each one of us – the human heart. These days, most of us know someone who has had some kind of heart repair. In fact, we hardly blink when we hear of triple or quadruple bypasses. Words like catheterization, stent, pacemaker and defibrilator are part of our vocabulary now – medical advancements that have made it possible to patch, jump-start, re-wire or re-configure a human heart so that it beats with regularity and rhythm – both essential to life itself. Such procedures bring hope to those living with diseased hearts and their families but they pale in comparison to what God can do with a human heart.

“I am the Lord your God.” On the mountain at Sinai, God began the address to the people of Israel and then went on to set down the guidelines intended to form each believer's behavior toward God and neighbor. If the people could just remember who was in charge and that God's will was for them to live in harmony with each other, the Israelites would have been well on their way to the abundant life their God intended for them. But they couldn't do it. Obedience to Yahweh too often consisted of trying to re-make God in their own image. Too often it was easier to ignore Yahweh's expectations about caring for others and instead allow themselves to be seduced by the false gods of self-absorption, pride and greed. The covenant at Sinai, God's commandments to the people, was etched with permanence upon tablets of stone. But the rebellious Israelites just would not live up to their side of the bargain.

God's judgment upon the kingdoms of Israel and Judah was swift and severe but punishment was not to be God's final word. Something drastic had to be done to restore a people evidently incapable of being holy on their own into the holy nation of God. So God, the One of limitless forgiveness and boundless compassion, created a **new** covenant, performing a kind of radical surgery on the diseased hearts of God's children.

Instead of writing the law upon cold, unyielding stone, God would perform a spiritual open-heart operation, jolting the hearts of the people into a rhythm of joyful obedience and re-shaping their arteries into vessels of compassion and love. This time, the covenant would be unbreakable. No amount of selfish, willful disobedience on the part of the people could ever nullify it. The new covenant was personalized, etched upon the heart of every believer, so that each would know God in a whole new way, just as intimately as that one was known by God.

It took some major surgery, but God crafted the changes necessary for the people to keep their side of the new covenant with God, making it possible for the God's chosen ones to respond to their creator's love whole-heartedly, with every fiber of body, mind and spirit.

Almost five weeks ago, we entered Lent through the door of Ash Wednesday. On that day, and throughout those since, we have heard many words directed straight to the heart of our relationship with God. On the day our foreheads were marked with the cross of Christ, we heard from the prophet Joel: “Yet even now, says the Lord, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning rend your hearts and not your clothing.” Guided by the words of the psalmist, we asked God: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.” Lent is a time of spiritual surgery. As we recall Jesus treatment at the hands of his enemies, we are forced to look inside our own hearts, to face the enormity of our sin and disobedience, and to admit the horrible truth of our own responsibility for Jesus' death. While we are doing this, every day of this journey to the cross, God has been re-shaping your heart and mine, cutting away all that keeps us from knowing God intimately, gently jump-starting those areas that have been dormant, re-filling the chambers with God's own precious blood, making room for the most basic and essential things of life: love and obedience to God. Even now, God is writing God's new covenant upon our hearts and fulfilling it in the flesh and blood of a savior whose presence brings God's plan new to us each day.

These 40 Lenten days compel us to admit that for all the sophistication of our day and time, we are more like our Israelite ancestors than we are different. You and I have allowed our hearts to be kidnpped by what Jeremiah called a stubborn, evil will, as we have aimlessly cast our allegiance into whatever waters sparkle the brightest at any given time. This Lent, having paid the ransom for our souls, God calls us to repentance, to return to the Lord our God, the one who has always been – and will always be – the source of fullest life. In Christ, you and I and our ancestors die to the old and live in the new. Through Christ, we dare to believe that God will transform the world using our transformed hearts as they beat in the rhythm of God's love.

“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 it will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they will be my people.” The new covenant that is Jesus Christ bridges the gap between God and us and cuts straight to the heart of all that matters in this life. As the cross looms larger before us, we know with a whole new clarity the enormous love of God. For is is precisely when the very heart of God stops beating on the cross that the whole world knows its fullness. God's new covenant has been written upon our hearts, born in our flesh, crucified for our sins and raised to restore the relationship broken by our ancestors and repeatedly shattered by us.

This is why we are able to join our voices with those of the past and call out, “We wish to see Jesus,” knowing that our request will be granted. Today and in the days ahead, listen and watch with your heart and you will find the One you seek. Hear the words of the heart as they speak straight to your soul, never more clearly than through this Lenten pilgrimage.

“For God so loved the world that he sent his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” “Take and eat. This is my body, given for you.” “The time has come for the Son of man to be glorified.” “Take and drink. This cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin.” “And I, when I am lifted up from this earth, will draw all people to myself.”

Amen.

*Lent 5B*

*March 22, 2015*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*John 12:20-33*