

The Heart of the Matter  
 We Have What it Takes: The Heart for Stewardship  
 Psalm 51:1-12  
 Luke 18:9-14  
 October 24, 2010  
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Did you read that the Vatican has announced that Homer and Bart Simpson are Catholic? It came as a surprise to the writers of "The Simpsons" because they claim the family attends the First Church of Springfield, and they are "Presby-Lutherans!" Well, I want to be the first to claim Dorothy of the "The Wizard of Oz" as a Methodist!

This "Methodist" tale, "The Wizard of Oz," has some lessons to teach us. Back in Kansas before the tornado, *mean* Miss Gulch is riding along on her bicycle, she gets off the bike, and marches in to Uncle Henry and Aunt Em, announcing to Dorothy that her dog Toto has got to go! Miss Gulch says, "That dog's a menace to the community. I'm taking him to the Sheriff and make sure he's destroyed." Dorothy responds with, "Destroyed? Toto? Oh you can't...you mustn't...Auntie Em—Uncle Henry—you won't let her...will you?" Uncle Henry looks at Aunt Em, and says, "Uh...ah...course, we won't...eh...a...Will we, Em?" Dorothy pleads, "Please, Aunt Em, Toto didn't mean to... He didn't know he was doing anything wrong. I'm the one that ought to be punished. I let him go in her garden...you can send me to bed without supper." But Miss Gulch insists, for she even has an order from the Sheriff. And off she goes with the dog in her bicycle basket. But down the road, Toto jumps out and runs home to Dorothy. We already see this morality tale unfolding, with Dorothy displaying a big heart.

Last week, in the Land of Oz, Dorothy met up with a companion, the Scarecrow, who wanted to get himself a brain, and now today we find the two of them on their way to the Emerald City, picking apples in an apple orchard.

(Dorothy and the Scarecrow are picking apples. Dorothy's hand closes on a tin foot. She raps on it, looks up, and sees the Tin Man.):

Why, it's a man! A man made out of tin!

Scarecrow: What?

Tin Man: Oil can! Oil can!

Dorothy: Did you say something?

Tin Man: Oil can!

Dorothy: He said, "Oil can."

Scarecrow: Oil can what?

Dorothy: Oil can, oh never mind...(picking up the oil can) Where do you want to be oiled?

Tin Man: My mouth!

Scarecrow: He said his mouth!

Dorothy (oils his mouth): Here.

Tin Man (clearing his throat): M-, my goodness! I can talk again. Oh, oil my arms please, my elbows!

(Dorothy oils his elbow on one side and passes the oil can to the Scarecrow, and he oils the other side.)

Tin Man: Oh! Oh! (He lowers his axe.)

Dorothy: Did that hurt?

Tin Man: No, it feels wonderful! I've been holding that axe up for ages!

Dorothy: Goodness, what happened?

Tin Man: Well, about a year ago, I was chopping wood when suddenly it began to rain.

Dorothy: Oh!

Tin Man: And right in the middle of a chop, I rusted solid. I've been that way ever since.

Dorothy (Scarecrow and Dorothy are working on his joints.): Well, you're perfect now!

Tin Man: Perfect? Oh, bang on my chest if you think I'm perfect. Go ahead.

(Dorothy raps on his chest.)

Scarecrow: Beautiful! What an echo!

Tin Man: It's empty. (He looks around, then lowers his voice) The tinsmith forgot to give me a heart.

Dorothy and Scarecrow (together): No heart?

Tin Man: No heart! (He bangs on his chest) All hollow!

Dorothy: Well, why couldn't you come with us to the Emerald City to ask the Wizard of Oz for a heart?

Tin Man: Suppose the Wizard wouldn't give me one?

Dorothy: Oh, he would! Come on,... to Oz! (They link arms)

Tin Man: To Oz!

Scarecrow: To Oz!

Dorothy, Tin Man, Scarecrow: We're off to see the Wizard, the wonderful Wizard of Oz!

So off they go to the Emerald City, so that Dorothy can find her way back home to Kansas, so that the Scarecrow can get a brain, and so that the Tin Man can find himself a heart. When they meet up with the Wizard, he agrees to help them, but one of them must first kill the Wicked Witch of the West who rules Winkie Country. As they embark on this heroic quest, they escape the winged monkeys, and then Dorothy throws a bucket of water on the Wicked Witch, and they watch her melt. The Winkies rejoice at being freed of the witch's tyranny! They fall in love with the Tin Man and ask him to be their ruler, which he agrees to do, after he helps Dorothy return to Kansas. Though the Tin Man claims he needs a heart, he can shed tears of love and be a loyal and compassionate companion on the journey.

In addition to "The Wizard of Oz," for finding truths about human nature, love and compassion, we have the Bible. What is the quality of love that God wants us to have? Our scripture from Luke gets to the heart of the matter. The writer purposely juxtaposes a Pharisee with a tax collector. Pharisees were supposed to be learned and holy. Tax collectors, on the other hand, were considered the epitome of sinfulness. One would expect the Pharisee to come out on top of the story. But in this parable, Jesus rewards the tax collector. "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted" (18:14). The moral of the story is—God loves the one who has a humble heart. Even though the Pharisee fasts and prays and even tithes a tenth of his income to the Temple, the one who repents humbly receives God's blessing.

"Give me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me" (Psalm 51:10). This is our Lenten prayer, our confessional prayer. It is a humble prayer for any season.

It's not about us! That's the bottom line. It's not about our being magnanimous. It's not about our being pious or self-righteous! Bragging about being a do-gooder just doesn't cut it.

At the end of "The Wizard of Oz," the Wizard says to the Tin Man: "As for you, my galvanized friend, you want a heart! You don't know how lucky you are not to have one. Hearts will never be practical until they can be made unbreakable." And then he says, "....A heart is not judged by how much you love, but by how much you are loved by others."

Having a heart means having some heartache and being at times broken hearted. I often tell people at the time of a death in the family, "Of course you are in grief. You loved deeply and so you will grieve deeply."

The Pharisee boasts: "I am not like the others.... I fast, I give to charity,... I, I, I!" People with the truly big hearts don't have to promote themselves. They humbly recognize their faults and modestly do what good they can to benefit others. It's all about God and helping others.

This kind of humble love we saw in our friend, El Hoffman, as he entered into this community, 15 months ago, when he and Louise moved here. El worked behind the scenes to help start an adult Sunday school class, by purchasing a DVD player and a curriculum and photocopying materials at his own expense. He didn't want any recognition. He had serious health conditions, but he didn't want to talk about them. He had a life of expertise in religion and education and ministry, but he never bragged about it. Instead he said how much he appreciated the people he came to know at this church. People loved him because he had a humble heart.

After I had chosen the title for this sermon, "The Heart of the Matter," I ran across a book by that title by Graham Greene. It's the story of a humble man who is Deputy Commissioner of a British colony in West Africa during World War II. Even when the Commissioner retires, Deputy Commissioner Major Scobie doesn't get a promotion. He stays in the number two position. In his marriage, he tries everything to please his wife, who is not easily pleased. In his friendships, he offers more than is expected, giving without expectation of affection in return. Scobie is strangely satisfied. Even when others feel sorry for him, he relishes the quiet beauty of a sunset, the peace of an evening home alone. He would rather do a kind deed than benefit himself in some personal way. He never minded being second in command. He didn't even mind being looked down upon as foolish at times. A few saw him for what he was—a good man with a good heart, and they knew that he had what others lacked, integrity. No need to boast about it, though. He certainly made his mistakes. But each evening before bed he recorded the event of the day—a suicide report, a shipwreck rescue, ...and then he prayed the prayer he knew, "Our Father," said a Hail Mary, and a prayer of contrition. Then he asked for blessings for the people in his life, and fell asleep before he mentioned more than a couple names....He slept well and generally carried himself with a solid feeling that living for others brings an inner peace. For Scobie that was enough.

Or he thought it was. But there is a turning point in the story, just after the author uses the words of the title, "The Heart of the Matter," Scobie finds he can't control the suffering and evil around him. A young child dies after the shipwreck. He remembers his own child's death. His wife leaves on a long holiday. He wants to help a sick woman whose husband died at sea, and ends up falling in love with her. He takes a bribe. He begins to lie. His life falls apart, and though he confesses to his priest, he cannot receive absolution because he honestly cannot say he will change his ways. Scobie has lost his faith that life is worth living. He has seen pain, and he can't seem to get back to the heart of the matter. The story ends as a tragedy, that didn't have to be. The story seems to be saying that responsible living is what keeps us going. We cannot control all that happens in life, but we can live with responsibility. We can be compassionate and giving, without expecting to create another person's happiness. We may sin, but with God's forgiveness, we can try again to lead a responsible life.

This kind of living is at the heart of the matter. My prayer is that we learn to live with humility. That we love with courage, doing what is right, not for our own gain, but for the needs of others. We may feel we can never do enough, but perhaps at least we can do our part. My prayer for our church is that our giving may be just this way. Like the Tin Man who wanted to have his joints oiled so that he could move and interact and contribute, we

too want to be moved that we might give in humble and generous ways. We have what it takes: the heart to be loving and responsible in our giving.