

Create in me a clean heart, O God

Hebrews 2:10-18.

The First Sunday after Christmas (Series A)

Who is this one who is both God and man? Hebrews 2:14 states: "He partook of the same nature, that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage."

In this modern world of psychology, we forget that sin, death, and the devil are all the same thing. We tend to make sin not very important, death a psychological problem, and the devil a laughing matter. But sin, death, and the devil are all the same thing.

Around the year 200, Tertullian, the first great father of the church in the Latin world, as he tried to think about what it means that God is both three and one, created the formula, "one substance and three persons." As the church has unpacked what it means that Christ is truly God and truly human, the first two Ecumenical Councils made sure that we said he is truly God because only then can he SAVE us. The Third Ecumenical Council made sure that he is truly human to save US.

But then the question arose: What's the relationship between the divine and the human? In 451 the Council of Chalcedon came up with the formula: "unmixed and undivided." In struggling with this whole problem, we easily get confused. He was truly both God and man at the same time, but we stumble thinking that he was God in some situations and human in others, or that he gave up his godness for a while.

Well, no! But what about when he said: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" (Matt 25:46)? Or when he died (John 19:30)? Or when he stilled the storm (Mark 4:35-41)? We think we can see through him and separate his "divinity" from his "humanity." But the answer is: Don't go that way. You don't go to "unmixed," and you don't go to "undivided."

The 1988 movie, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, by Nikos Kazantzakis, depicted the life of Jesus and his inner struggle with various temptations. Kazantzakis turned Jesus into a tragic hero, like Zorba the Greek. The film itself was a kind of temptation, tempting us to think that we can figure out this whole problem. No, we can't. We must not and dare not.

The real danger for us is that we psychologize. The Bible isn't a book of psychology; it's a book of theology. We describe Christ as "one substance—three persons," and "one person—two natures." Hebrews 2:14 states that he had a human nature. The original word for "person" in both Latin and Greek does not mean what we mean by "person." In its original usage it means "mask," the way that in medieval times one would have a mask on a staff, one for comedy, another for tragedy.

What goes wrong is that people tend to say: "God became one of us. He became a person. He's a person. We are persons. We can think of him as our friend."

To be sure, we love the hymn: "What a friend we have in Jesus." But there's a basic difference. John 15:13 states: "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." The very next verse, verse 14 states: "You are my friends if you do what I have commanded you." And then verse 16: "You did not choose me, but I chose you."

This is a very different kind of relationship than what we mean by friendship among us because we have common interests or common goals with our friends. This is quite different: "You did not choose me; I chose you." And the giving up of himself as it says in Romans 5:8: "God shows his love for us in that while we were sinners, Christ died for us" – is far beyond our idea of friendship. We must be careful not to mix up the two, that he is God and human, so that we become his chums or his buddies. He is still the Supreme Majesty who created all things out of nothing. (The song, "In the Garden," is a prime example of this kind of confusion and error.)

It's common today for some preachers to say that you have to have a personal relationship with Jesus. You have to "know Jesus." The main thing is that you have a **real** personal relationship, and you should deepen this relationship.

Under this kind of "friendship" preaching, hearers are driven to ask themselves: Do I have a relationship? Is it real? Is it continuing? Is it growing? You better make sure that you are not going to church because of some general churchliness, but because you have a real relationship with Jesus, etcetera, etc.

But this is to mix up the two natures of Christ. Because he is truly divine, there is no way we have a personal relationship! That's just a new law, a new requirement.

This same kind of spirituality that insists on a personal relationship also often says that it's not about doctrine, it's about what's in your heart. You should "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind" (Luke 10:27).

As you well know, what's tricky in that is the word "all" – **all** your heart, **all** your soul, **all** your strength, **all** your mind – which suddenly makes it clear that that is impossible.

But this verse is also taken in the wrong direction when it is used to imply that it's what's in your heart that is important. These other things – soul, strength, and mind – are not what it is about. They are overlooked. All that really matters is your "heart."

The Scripture is very clear about the "heart," particularly Jeremiah 17:9: "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately corrupt. Who can understand it?"

In Romans 3:10-18 Paul describes how we are totally caught in sin:

“[A]s it is written: ‘None is righteous, no not one; no one understands, no one seeks for God. All have turned aside, together they have gone wrong; no one does good, not even one.’ ‘Their throat is an open grave, they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips.’”

It goes on in that vein. Therefore the idea that we in ourselves – that we can and must and will do what’s right – is contrary to what the Scripture is saying.

Those who preach a spirituality of the heart also often appeal to Romans 10:9: “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” Well! Remembering what Paul writes in Romans 3:10-12 about our inner selves, what do we do now?

This is the problem of how to use the Bible. If you read Romans 10:5-17 as a unit, the context and the purpose is seen in the ending of the whole passage, 10:17, which says: “Faith comes by hearing and hearing comes by the preaching of Christ.”

Paul is really dealing here with the public event of preaching and proclamation. If you look closely, Romans 10:9 is about public confession, that is, the way we confess the Creed in the worship service. The same is true about 10:9b: “. . . if you believe in your heart that Jesus is Lord . . .” That is a parallel phrase which means the same thing as confessing the Creed.

Because people today have the idea that, because we can and we must have a personal relationship with Christ, therefore we have to make that relationship with Christ **real**. No! That is simply a new law, a new burden. We need to remember how Scripture works, not only Romans 10:17, but in the whole of Scripture it’s not a question of if I have Jesus in my heart; it’s whether Jesus has me in his heart!

First of all, Jesus has me in his heart because of what he did on the cross, and he continues to have me in his heart when he makes me his own in Baptism. Paul writes in Philippians 3:12: “Not that I have made it my own, but because Christ Jesus has made me his own.” And in Philippians 2:12-13: “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” And Galatians 2:20: “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I live is by the faith of Christ, who loved me and gave himself for me.” It is what he is doing and not what we are doing. In the Augsburg Confession, Article V makes this big point:

“To obtain such faith God instituted the office of ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit, who creates faith, when and where he pleases, in those who hear the Gospel.”

It is not some word in us; the external word is what does what is to be done. Therefore when we sing the refrain from Psalm 51:10: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew

a right spirit within me," that's **God's doing**, not my doing. It is the same in Jeremiah 31:33: "He will create a new heart." He does it! Not we.

We can be easily caught in the confusion about God as person, and wrongly think that therefore we must have a real personal relationship with him. No, he is the Lord. Thank God he is the Lord! Because then he can deal with sin, death, and the devil, which, humanly speaking, cannot be done. Thank the Lord. Amen