



## SUNDAY SERMON

### Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me

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“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.” Words of petition and prayer from Psalm 51(v.11). Please pray them with me: Create in me a clean heart, O God. And renew a right spirit within me. I propose we make this our daily prayer. At different times, I’ve selected a single verse to repeat in my prayers morning and night – a prayer that will help open me and make me available to God. Not knowing what will come of it, not knowing how the Spirit will move or whisper within. Once again: Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.

In our Hebrew text this morning, the prophet Jeremiah offers words of extraordinary consolation and promise to a people broken, divided, and persecuted. God has been fed up with the waywardness of God’s chosen people, for they squabbled and fought without end, different camps and groups each pursuing their own agenda, unable to listen to the other or to find any common ground. In their division, they were conquered, taken captive, held in exile in Babylon. Jeremiah had prophesied that God would pluck up their habitations and tear the people down – and it has come to pass. But now, God has turned. Jeremiah promises that God will plant and build anew. In the crucible of this transition, Jeremiah speaks a new covenant on God’s behalf:

I will make a new covenant with them. It will supersede the one God made with Moses on Mount Sinai – in which God’s promises were given in exchange for the proper response from the people - obedience to the commandments. In this new covenant, God will take responsibility for and empower the people to uphold their part in the agreement. Says the Lord, “I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

There comes a time in our lives when we get to the end of our rope. It appears we’ve exhausted our options, used up the goodwill of others. We simply cannot save ourselves from ourselves or from those things that have power over us. A step in any direction will not help. It’s not a good place to be. (But) It is a place from which we can pray: Create in me a clean heart, O God. It is a place from which we may truly understand Jesus’ teaching, blessed are the poor and blessed are the poor in spirit, for it is only in knowing our poverty that we discover our dependence upon God alone.

I am speaking in personal terms, but Jeremiah was speaking of the poverty and waywardness of an entire people, an entire nation. And I wonder: if we find ourselves in this country in a place that has some similarities. Jeremiah, of course, was addressing a beleaguered exiled little nation and it would be disrespectful of those in true need to suggest that our problems in this wealthiest, most powerful nation on earth are similar. Yet I see a parallel in the current intractability, animosity and suspicion with which different groups in this country view others.

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#### DATE

Lent V  
Sunday, Mar. 17, 2018

#### PREACHER

The Rev. Ledlie Laughlin

#### VERSES

Jeremiah 31:31-34  
Psalm 51:1-2, 7-12

I find the behavior of some to be reprehensible. And am startled to realize they have a similar opinion of me. At the moment we seem to be incapable of saving ourselves from ourselves.

I know that's an offense to our independent, can-do, sense of ourselves but before you fashion your refute, bear with me a moment. In her new book, *Political Tribes: Group Instinct and the Fate of Nations*, Amy Chua illumines the deep natural attachment all people have to a particular tribe – ethnic, geographic, economic, gender-based, and so forth. Professor Chua, who specializes in ethnic conflict and globalization at Yale Law School, shows how a misreading of the influence of tribal identity led to poor decisions in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan. She applies the same analysis to increasing compartmentalization of identity groups in this country – from Nascar nation and the World Wrestling Federation to sensitivity of micro-aggressions for different gender and racial identity. It is increasingly difficult to talk across our divides.

On more than one occasion, I laughed as she outed me as part of the coastal elite, the progressive elite. Just two weeks ago, in a sermon that apparently resonated with many of you, I spoke of taking a stand and protesting unjust policies. The next day I read Chua's quote of a student from rural South Carolina: "I think protesting is almost a status symbol for elites. That's why they always post pictures on Facebook, so all their friends know they're protesting. When elites protest on behalf of us poor people... it seems they are turning us, many of whom have a great deal of pride, into the next 'meme.' We don't like being used as a prop for someone else's self-validation." Black lives matter is an elemental statement of truth for some, yet a divisive threat for others.

Says Chua, "we find ourselves in an unprecedented moment of pervasive tribal anxiety.... Every group feels attacked, pitted against other groups not just for jobs and spoils but for the right to define the nation's identity. In these conditions, democracy devolves into zero-sum group competition – pure political tribalism." (p.177)

Even though many of our tribal particularities are neither good nor bad in and of themselves, I do not see moral neutrality or equality across the spectrum. Be that as it may, the problem is that, so confident are we in the legitimacy and rightness of our respective identities, we have – at least for now – lost our capacity for substantive communication across our divides. It is as if we literally speak different languages and the tone of your language may well be offensive to my ears.

Trying harder is one option. I expect most of us will keep at it. Chua is hopeful; she lifts up those who are finding ways to listen first, speak later. We can do that too. Asking for help is another option: O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come. Human nature being what it is, I take as a given that we would always prefer to achieve or earn our desired outcome and be proud, than we would to receive it and be grateful. But asking for help, especially if we're accustomed to agency and power, acknowledging our need, our brokenness and fragility... moves us into a position of openness and posture of receptivity. I don't know what God will do with us. I don't know how the Spirit will open our ears, quicken our hearts, or open our arms to one another. And that's precisely the point. So I propose we find ways to pray, every day: Create in me a clean heart, O God.

Imagine: what if, at this very moment, God looks upon our nation and says, "I will put my law – my law – within them, upon their hearts; I will be their God; they will be my people."

Shortly after I arrived at the parish I served for six years in Norwalk, Connecticut, a letter came from the Jessie Ball DuPont Fund. When I asked, the vestry said they'd received previous letters but didn't really know the connection. So I called. It turns out, when she died Jessie Ball DuPont stipulated that her vast wealth could only be distributed through grants to organizations to which she'd given in her life time. Most of these were in Wilmington; most were universities and hospitals. But tucked in among the others was our little church. We were heirs to a fortune. They could only give us money if we applied for certain things. And if we had trouble with any aspect of the application, they would help us. They wanted to give us a lot of money to do good things in the city. But we had to ask. Just like that new covenant Jeremiah spoke of. Yes, we did ask. We

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gathered many public and private partners – teachers, artists, social-workers – and launched an afterschool arts program for scores of middle school youth.

We never know what God is going to do in our hearts and our lives, but we have a pretty good idea of our own limits. So let's give it a try. Say it with me: Create in me a clean heart O God, and renew your Spirit within me. Let it be so.