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Sermon—17Feb19
Jer. 17
“Heartfelt”

In the Name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.

Ever wonder why Valentine’s Day has become such a major event in our society?

Well, we can see that the holiday is good for business! A romantic restaurant can triple its prices on that day. Candy sellers and card shops and jewelry stores get extra customers, too.

One can also see the social benefits of the day. Couples are glad to have a special occasion to celebrate their love. These celebrations may be a strain on the bank account, but people in relationships happily pay the price.

Yet there may also be a third reason that people place such an importance on Valentine’s Day. And that reason reflects a spiritual truth that holds for single people as well as for couples. We find this truth embedded in our Old Testament Lesson for today.

In that lesson, the Prophet Jeremiah is recording a revelation he has received from God. In the revelation, the Lord tells him, “The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse--who can understand it? I the Lord test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings.”

“The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse--who can understand it?”

Now that saying may seem a bit cynical. Saying we have devious and perverse hearts is not very uplifting!

But isn’t it true? Aren’t we all prone to deceiving ourselves about one thing or another? How many of us could say that we really know ourselves?

Don’t we over-value our intelligence—thinking we are more clever than we really are? Or maybe we have an inflated estimate of our good looks? Or we think that we are much nicer people than we are?

And aren’t we likely to be “devious” sometimes in our relations with others? When we fail to keep our promises to our friends, for example--and then we hasten to make up excuses as to why we haven’t done what we said we would do for them?

How the human heart is devious! This may not be the best thought for Valentine’s Day—but this may be a reason why people go out of their way to celebrate it!

For we need to make amends for all those moments when our hearts let us down. And we need to celebrate the foundation of any healthy relationship: *honesty*.

After all, the opposite of “devious” is “honest.” And honesty is essential to all important human associations, not just romantic relations.

Many affairs of the heart are destroyed when one member of the couple secretly gets involved with another person and undermines what was supposed to be an exclusive relationship.

By the same token, a friendship can be destroyed when one friend learns that the other has been saying sarcastic things about him behind his back.

Still, we might ask, what does Jeremiah’s revelation have to do with *God*?

Well, for one thing, we don’t have to worry about God being dishonest! As the Bible says, “I the Lord test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways...”

And when God “searches our hearts,” we can be confident that God’s all-knowing mind can discern exactly what’s going on inside us!

I find this idea to be oddly comforting. God isn’t deceived by my self-deceptions. God knows everything, and that includes what’s going on in my mind.

And that means that God can *share* my burdens. I’m not alone in my self-deception. I don’t have to try to wiggle out of the consequences of my dishonest thoughts and actions.

During one segment of the worship services that are regularly held in our church, we take a moment to ask God to help us with our devious hearts. That is the part of the service where we “confess our sins unto Almighty God.”

When we say the General Confession, we acknowledge that we have made mistakes. There are things that we ought to have done; there are things that we ought not to have done.

From the perspective of self-care, it’s important that we recognize the mistakes that we make. For only by recognizing them can we learn to do better in the future.

But there’s an additional benefit: by confessing our sins *to God*, we admit God’s healing power into our lives. We need to use our free will to tap into this power. But when we do, we find that what the Prayer Book calls “our sins and offenses and negligences” no longer weigh quite so heavily upon us.

And God assures us that it is possible for us to be honest with ourselves. God sends us “the Spirit of Truth.” With that Spirit within us, we can see ourselves as we really are. For example, I need to be on the lookout for ways that I’m not being as nice a person as I think I am.

This regular self-examination before God keeps us honest. You have probably known someone who helped you to face certain facts about yourself.

Maybe you were telling a friend about your attempts at dieting. Your friend noticed the foods that you were eating on your so-called “diet,” and she questioned whether you were serious about losing weight. Your friend kept you honest.

So our prayer—our regular communication with God—is good for our souls. God doesn’t miss a trick that we play with our devious hearts. And we’re better off as a result.

Finally, we should remember that famous saying of Jesus: “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

This saying is first of all about financial treasure, of course. What we spend our money on tells us a lot about our basic values in life. Someone who pays the monthly fees of a New York City gym wants the benefits of serious exercise and is willing to bear the cost of the gym.

But what we treasure in our hearts is a far more important matter. That’s why *Saint Valentine’s Day* is a religious holiday as well as a secular one.

As Christians, we admit that the “devices and desires of our hearts” can lead us astray. But as Christians, we also admit that God can make us into persons guided by honesty and integrity. Not to mention, God can make us into persons filled with love!

And now unto that same God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be ascribed as is most justly due all might, majesty, power, dominion, and praise, now and forever. Amen.