

“Aligning Our Hearts Voluntarily” (Aligning Our Hearts 3 of 4)

a sermon based on

Matthew 2:1-14

and delivered on-

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at

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

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Today, we continue this sermon series, *Aligning Our Hearts*. So far we've explored the need to align our hearts and our giving thoughtfully (using the intellect that God gave us) and to align our hearts and our giving enthusiastically (that is with anticipation instead of reluctance). Today, we turn to what it means to align our hearts and our giving voluntarily.

God gives us free will. He doesn't compel us to do anything. He tells us that there are consequences. Even in the Garden of Eden when God told the man and the woman to stay away from one tree, he let it be their choice to listen. He didn't do it callously, but told them what the consequence would be, that they would die. And what happened? They used their free will, ate from that tree, and were set out of the Garden away from the Tree of Life that would allow them to live forever. We forget that part – or maybe we just ignore it – that God put eternal life in their midst and that all they had to do was to choose life in God's presence rather than arrogantly and mistakenly seeking to be equal with God. If you remember, that was the lie that the serpent told them about God's motive for telling them to avoid that tree. In reality, God was giving them the opportunity for free will. Why? Because free will is essential for love. Love can't be compelled or forced, it's voluntary. Does that make sense?

No one can force us to love, not even God; because love that is forced is not love, but pretense. This is why God so treasures our love and devotion, because when it happens it's real. It's not something we do compelled by instinct, like my dogs' devotion to me because their pack instincts which evolved in their wolf ancestors and the submissive traits that were bred into them by my ancestors serve their needs. Don't get me wrong, animals do display affection, they have that capacity; but they are creatures of innate instinctive behavior.

Humans are different. We see that even in "perfect" families where the choice to love gets rejected. Because we have an intellect, we are able to know and anticipate consequences for our choices and not just the immediate and obvious consequences, or at least make sense out of those consequences which we fail to anticipate.

Remember, consequences aren't all bad. The consequence of surprising my wife with flowers, is what? She's happy. A happy wife makes a happy life. So the saying goes. Right?

It's like that in our relationships, including our relationship with God. When we choose to attend worship together (even when a pandemic constrains how that happens and means that some of us have to do so remotely) it makes God happy? That really is the measure of whether worship was good or not. (At least that's the premise of the dissertation that I still need to write.) Just like making your spouse or children or parents happy brings you joy (It does? Right?) so is our worship transformed when pay attention to that context.

The consequence of doing so is an empowered spirit to claim the blessings that God offers and strength to endure the challenges we face in the world. But God doesn't force it. Each of you had a choice whether to worship in this moment. Even as a child when my mom took me to church (not much choice, but I didn't think about it that way), I had a choice as to whether I would avail myself of the opportunity to worship the Almighty and claim Jesus' love as a consequence, or I could sulk that the preacher was going on too long and I'd miss the opening kickoff for the football game.

In the Gospel lesson today, we hear about a similar choice. A king sends out invitations to all of his friends to a wedding banquet. Some made excuses, other outright snubbed him even killing the messengers who delivered the invitation. The murders received the consequence for

their actions. Those who made excuses lost out on the king's love, not because he was angry but because they didn't accept the invitation.

So, what does the king do? He sends his servants into the streets and tells them to "invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet." (Mt. 22:9) When they do, the banquet hall is filled. Because of the great, undeserved, and unexpected honor that they had received, they went home to wash and put on their finest clothes to show the king how much they appreciated the invitation. That is except for one. Right?

It's telling, that when we he was asked why he wasn't wearing a wedding robe, he was speechless. That's important. It's important because of what he didn't say. He didn't say, "I have no wedding robe," "or this is the best robe that I have and I know it's not up to par, but I had to come anyway lest the king think I had rejected him." He wasn't rejected because his clothes weren't good enough. I don't know if he was intentionally making a mockery of the invitation, if he was just trying to get what he could from the king's household, or if he just came out of curiosity. Jesus doesn't really give us a clue in this parable. The only thing that we do know is that he made a choice to withhold his best from God.

That's actually the choice that Cain made in Genesis 4 where we hear about the conflict that arose between him and his brother. Although Cain made the decision to give a portion of his crops as an offering to the Lord, Abel freely decided to offer the firstlings of his flocks and the best portions to show God how much he loved him. For Abel, his relationship with God was not an afterthought or a burden but something to celebrate. As a consequence, God honored his offering. He didn't reject Cain's offering. That's not what Scripture says. Instead it says that he just didn't care for it. Sort of like if I surprise my wife with the wilted flowers that the florist was preparing to discard.

Actually, I can think of only three times in Scripture where God is not pleased with an offering. There's this incidence with Cain (I think) reluctantly offering some of what was left over after he had what he wanted. There's the time in 1 Samuel 15 when God rejected Saul's sacrifice after his conquest of the Amalekites, not because Saul didn't offer the best – he did; but because the best he offered wasn't his to offer and was actually a demonstration of his disobedience to God's commands. Finally, there's the incident in Acts 5 when Ananias and his wife Sapphira are both struck dead, not because they didn't give the church everything that they owned but because they lied saying that they did, even though Peter told him that what he had was his to do with as he chose.

Everywhere else God celebrates our freedom to choose how we responds. In 2 Corinthians 9:7 we hear "Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion." Why? Because, "God loves a cheerful giver." That'll be our theme for next week: aligning our hearts and giving cheerfully.

The Bible sets a tithe (ten percent) as the model for giving; but God never forces someone to do so. He invites us to put on our best for the wedding and to give our best; but he doesn't force us. Try that with the IRS. Right? Worldly governments make demands. The kingdom of heaven offers an invitation to participate. It offers freedom.

When we make our decision about how and how much and to whom we will give one of the wonderful consequences is the peace of mind and the freedom it brings us in life. For me, it means I don't feel guilty saying, "No." Because I tithe (and even when I was still growing in

that direction), I know that I am doing my part for the kingdom of God even if my part isn't as large as some others. Because I've chosen to be generous, I don't have to feel guilty for not giving to everyone with a bucket at a stop sign or standing outside of a store. I'm freed from the pressure to give because others will see me not giving.

Whatever we choose to give, to share, to return to God through the church finds its value not in the dollar amount but in the choice we make out of our own free will.

Jesus didn't have to die on that cross. Scripture tells us that he didn't even want to. Right? "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me;" but he did so anyway, "yet, not my will but yours be done." (Lk 22:42) Why? Because he knew there were consequences, not for him but for us. Jesus knew that giving himself for our sakes, meant extending us an invitation to take back what had been lost by our own misguided free will in the garden and to claim the life God always intended.

When we align our hearts with the kingdom of God, it can only happen voluntarily. Everything else is pretense. So this week, when you receive an invitation to let the church know how much you will be offering to our shared ministry, remember it's a choice. A choice with consequences for good, so that others might claim their invitation to the heavenly banquet. AMEN.