

“A New and Right Spirit”

Psalm 51:1-10

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost - Independence Day – Sunday, July 4, 2010

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Have mercy upon me, O God ... and put a new and right spirit within me. [Psalm 51:1a, 10b]

The ancient Greeks understood very clearly that a city or a nation was essentially a human system. Their word for city was *polis*. It is no coincidence that *polis* is the root of our English word “politics.” The role of those who control the *polis*, that is, its leaders, according to the Greeks, was not primarily to maximize commerce or minimize crime or increase tax revenues or foster wealth, although those were happy by-products of wise policy-making and the pursuit of private enterprise. The aim of leaders in the *polis* was to nurture human souls, to enable all people to develop worthy passions and achieve worthy aims. Their focus was on the human dimension of the city. I pray that today we can all reaffirm that this is our focus, too ... that America is a human place. Primarily, it is a place for people like you and me, and lots of other people who are both much like us and very different from us. A nation must first and always be a human place. Surely that is the basic component of the heart of America.

In many religious traditions the heart is the seat of human emotions: love, fear, joy, disappointment, hope, hurt, and compassion ... that last word “compassion” is one that is often translated from the Hebrew of the Old Testament into English as the word “mercy.” The psalmist in Psalm 51 appeals to the heart of God and pleads: “Have *mercy* on me, O God.” The corollary of this faith principle is that those who pray to God for mercy for themselves are called on by God to be merciful to others. We see this same principle of receiving and giving mercy in the words of the Lord’s Prayer each time we pray, “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” So I want to suggest that “a new and right spirit” within all God’s people should have mercy as one of its strongest components. America has a merciful heart when we – both leaders and followers – embrace and express mercy in our day-to-day dealings with our fellow human beings.

I’m not sure who said this, but it is a powerful thought: “When we show mercy, we experience liberation. We are set free from grudges that drain the strength and unsettle the mind . . . The most miserable prison in the world is the prison we make for ourselves when we refuse to show mercy. Our thoughts become shackled, our emotions are chained, and our will is almost paralyzed. But when we show mercy, all of these bonds are broken, and we enter into a joyful liberty that frees us to share God’s love with others. This blessing of freedom is one way that we receive mercy as we show mercy.”

Put a new and right spirit within me. Mercy at the center of our nation’s heart is a big part of “a new and right spirit” that we are joining the psalmist in prayer to God for today. When we utter this prayer God calls *all* of us to go through life sharing God’s mercy and not judging people to see if they are worthy of what we have to offer. When we pray, *Put a new and right spirit within me*, God calls *all* of us to cease looking at

the externals and to begin to see people through the merciful eyes of God. *A new and right spirit* opens our minds to understand that every person we meet is a person made in God's image and one whom God loves unconditionally. *A new and right spirit* opens our eyes to see each human being as a candidate for God's mercy.

Let's remember that when we pray for mercy for ourselves we cannot expect mercy if we are not prepared to express mercy. Since at least one thing we all have in common is a yearning for a great future for our nation, let us keep asking God to help us to do our part by putting *a new and right spirit* within us ... asking that a large chunk of mercy be part of that spirit.

What difference might that make? Recall the parable Jesus told about a shepherd and his lost sheep. The shepherd is usually interpreted as the Lord and the one lost sheep as someone of worth and value to the Lord ... someone the Lord loves and cares for. Jesus told this parable in response to the murmuring of the Pharisees and the Scribes because he was seen to be associating with people who were considered by the religious leaders of the day to be less than desirable. The shepherd in the parable models *a new and right spirit* by going after the sheep that has strayed, or has got lost, or has found itself on the margins of the grazing area, or has fallen prey to some creature that threatens to devour it. *A new and right spirit* is one of love for all of God's creation, of unconditional acceptance of all of God's people, and of a willingness to go out of the way to show mercy for the weak, or helpless, or estranged, or captured.

Translate *a new and right spirit* now from parable to probable ... from ideals in the pastoral hills of Palestine to realities on the streets and in the neighborhoods of America. Hear some voices in Thomasville and every American city that murmur against "those people" ... sometimes even questioning their place or presence in our city ... sometimes saying: "Leave them to their own devices; they got themselves into a mess, let them get themselves out on their own."

Let me end with the picture of the heart of America. Let us listen to its heart ... listen for the possibility of any irregular heartbeats. Let us regularly measure its performance and get good reports on its condition. Let us constantly pray as leaders and followers for God to put *a new and right spirit* within us ... that in all our doings and dealings, our initiatives and plans, our decisions and policies, we will treat our nation primarily as a human place and show mercy because we, ourselves, have received mercy. As we
come to the Table of the Lord may this be our ardent prayer for ourselves and for America: *Have mercy upon me, O God ... and put a new and right spirit within me.*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.