

# AFFIRMATIVE ACTIONS

Sermon, September 26, 2010

Texts: Jeremiah 32:1-15; I Timothy 6:6-10

Christiaan Barnard of South Africa was the first doctor to successfully perform a heart transplant operation on December 3, 1967. His second transplant was January 2, 1968; the patient was a 58 year old dentist by the name of Philip Blaiberg. A week or so after the surgery, the surgeon asked the patient if he would like to see his old heart ... the one that had been removed. Dr Barnard took a glass jar containing Blaiberg's old heart off a shelf and handed it to him. For the first time in human history, a man actually looked at his own heart (and lived). The doctor and the patient both stared in silence realizing the significance of the moment. Blaiberg then commented: "So that is the old heart that caused me so much trouble." This man literally had a change of heart.

*"So that is the old heart that caused me so much trouble."* The prophet Jeremiah declared in 17:9, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" But Jeremiah also received this promise from God, 24:7 -- "I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the LORD. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart." This is echoed in 32:39 (ESV) "I will give them one heart and one way, so they will always fear me for their own good and the good of their children after them." You know, God promises He will give a change of heart to all who come to Him; through His Spirit He will help rid us of the old deceitful heart that has caused us so much trouble and give us a new heart. God the Father through the Spirit wants to transplant the holy heart of His Son into us so we can think His thoughts, feel what He feels, love what He loves. As echoed through Ezekiel, "And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. (*Ezekiel 36:26*)

Due to time constraints last week, I edited out on the spot a list of six criteria to help in gauging whether our actions are, in fact, good and right. Adapted from a classic sermon from Harry Emerson Fosdick, one of America's most well-known preachers in his day, entitled, *"Six Ways to Distinguish Right from Wrong."* Six ways to, as George Bernard Shaw put it, "...take a mob of appetites and make them into an organized army of purposes and principles." I like Shaw's imagery; that's what sanctification is all about: taking this unruly mob of appetites and desires that make up the human body and making them into an army of one with one heart, a heart that beats for high purposes and glorious principles and fights the good fight of the faith. The six criteria:

- 1. The Common Sense Test.** The first step in discerning right from wrong in our actions is to apply Common Sense. That seems easy; unfortunately, common sense isn't all that common nowadays. How many times have you asked yourself in regret, "What was I thinking?" Too often we put our bodies or our mouths in gear while our mind is still in neutral. When you are contemplating some action, think! Use the common sense God put in your redeemed heart, and trust it. Sometimes we just don't know why something doesn't seem right, at such times we need to trust our God-given instincts. One good way to engage your common sense is to ask yourself: "How would I judge someone else if that person did the same thing I'm contemplating doing?"
- 2. The Sportsmanship Test.** Ask yourself, "Am I playing fair?" How would you feel if someone else did the same thing to you or to someone you loved? The essence of sportsmanship is that in a game we do not make one set of rules for ourselves and one for the opposing team. If it is not right for *everyone*, it is probably not right for *anyone*. Sportsmanship is another way applying the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." (see Matthew 7:12)
- 3. The Best Self Test.** Ask yourself, "Will this action help me become a better person?" Will this contemplated action help you be the best you can be?
- 4. The Publicity Test.** Ask yourself, "If everyone knew what I am doing, or what I am planning to do, would I still do it?" It can be surprising how the light of public knowledge changes our perspective and our behavior. Would I want everyone to know what I am doing right now? Would I want my friends to know, or my mother and father to know, or my teacher, or that woman or gentleman I'm trying to impress, or my pastor to know? Would I want the police to know? Generally speaking, things that have to be done in secret are neither good nor healthy.
- 5. The Most Admired Person Test:** This is similar to the Publicity test, but with a slightly different twist. Think about the person you most admire. Would that person do what you are contemplating doing? Or, if you told that person about it, would you feel proud or ashamed?

**6. The Foresight Test.** Think: "What could possibly go wrong?" Could you live with those consequences? Perhaps more importantly, could you make others live with the potential consequences of your actions?

These six insights are helpful, but you know, probably the best barometer of all our actions is to ask this question: "Does this action I'm contemplating affirm or deny my faith?" Are my actions "affirmative actions," in the proper sense of that phrase? (*As someone cynically defined Affirmative Action – "Because we've historically granted privileges to others by their race, creed, color or gender, we are now going to fix that by granting privileges to others by their race, creed, color or gender."*) Do these actions affirm what I believe? Do they come from the *heart* of my faith?

Our lectionary Old Testament text today is subtitled, "Jeremiah Buys a Field." It could be subtitled, "Jeremiah's Affirmative Action." The setting for chapter 32 was the second year of the siege of Jerusalem by the armies of Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon (*Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in 586 BC*). It was a dark time. The Babylonians were literally at the gate, they were patiently building earthen ramps to breach the walls; the city was doomed, and Jeremiah himself was under house arrest. He had prophesied for twelve years that Jerusalem would be destroyed. Finally, the king of Judah has had it with Jeremiah. Having angered the king with his gloomy prophecies, Jeremiah was placed under house arrest; it is while he is thus confined that he watches his God-given prediction of doom come true.

Now, what an opportune time for Jeremiah to make a long-term investment in local real estate, is it not?! He's imprisoned, the barbarians are at the gate, the city is doomed; in fact, the field he wants to buy is already occupied by the invading Babylonians. But his investment was a public affirmation of faith ... an heroic and public demonstration of his sure and certain *hope*. For God had promised His prophet that, though this disaster is coming, and they would be carried off into exile, the exile would end and the nation would be restored. Jeremiah affirms his faith in God's promises by investing in local real estate. As Jeremiah relates the story to King Zedekiah, God had told Jeremiah his cousin Hanamel is going to come and offer his field for sale; and He told Jeremiah, in so many words: "Buy it. Go ahead. Invest in the security of My promises. You can bank on them!" Sure enough, Hanamel came. It's no mystery why Hanamel wants to sell, but who in their right mind would want to buy at such a time? But Jeremiah literally puts his money where his mouth is; more properly, where his *heart* is. He has a heart for God; he has a heart from God. And his use of his pocketbook gives evidence of that; he invests in the things he believes in (*which is a great lesson in stewardship*). This was Jeremiah's very public affirmative action of faith in the promises of God. The transaction is carried out with legal precision; signing, sealing, the presence of witnesses and the whole works. All the conditions of the sale were carefully specified. Verse 14: "This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Take these documents, both the sealed and unsealed copies of the deed of purchase, and put them in a clay jar so they will last a long time. For this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: *Houses, fields and vineyards will again be bought in this land.*" Jeremiah bought the field as a sign that hope still has a future. He remembered the promise of God; 29:11 (*the verse, by the way, that has given our youth fellowship a new name*) – "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future."

If there is an over-arching theme which emerges out of our two lectionary readings today, it is a question: Where do you and I seek security? Money seems to be the thing most people regularly think of when it comes to security. We even use the word "security" as a synonym for property, with its attendant analysts, salespeople and traders. But are securities really all that secure? That question, of course, leads to attempts to shelter our securities. But is there really such a thing as a sheltered security? That sounds like an oxymoron. "Some people, eager for money," writes Paul, "have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs." When we invest our lives in the pursuit of money alone, we do wander from the faith and we do set ourselves up for much grief and heartache. Paul continues, "But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith: take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses."

In short, invest your life in the security of God's promises. Set your "transplanted" hearts on things above. Receive whatever resources or opportunities you have as God's gifts from above. For when we do that, when we treat our resources, our time, our opportunities as God's gifts, we transform them from something to hoard into something we have been given to use ... something we have been given to use in ways that actively affirm our hope in God and His promises.