

“Heart Surgery”

“So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Romans 6:11).

Romans 2:25-29, 4:9-13, 6:11 ¹

This morning we resume our journey through the Bible, focusing on passages I’ve never preached on before in thirty years of pastoral ministry. We’ve arrived at the book of Romans, and I’ve discovered that I’ve never preached from any part of chapters 2, 4, 9, or 16. We’re going to look at chapters 2 and 4 today, and the other two chapters in the next several weeks.

The passage Chris read earlier may seem obscure, but it leads us into some very good news indeed. The text Chris read was about the surgical procedure of circumcision, and circumcision isn’t something you and I think about very much these days except in the first hours after boy babies are born. But circumcision is a significant topic in the Bible, being mentioned eighteen times in the Old Testament and thirty-five times in the New Testament. You may remember that in the beginning, God told Abraham to begin the practice of circumcision as a sign of being numbered among God’s chosen people who would later become known as Israel (Genesis 17:9-27).

Once the New Covenant came into effect at Jesus’ resurrection, a great debate followed about whether non-Jews who became followers of Jesus had to be circumcised with the sign of that first covenant. Although the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 concluded that Gentile converts did not need to be circumcised, the debate continued to rage for decades, and Paul’s comments to the Christians in Rome have to be understood against this backdrop.

Open your Bibles to Romans 4 and let’s see what else Paul said on this subject. We’ll begin with verse 1: ¹ *Abraham was, humanly speaking, the founder of our Jewish nation. What did he discover about being made right with God?* ² *If his good deeds had made him acceptable to God, he would have had something to boast about. But that was not God’s way.* ³ *For the Scriptures tell us, “Abraham believed God, and God counted him as righteous because of his faith.”*

⁴ *When people work, their wages are not a gift, but something they have earned.* ⁵ *But people are counted as righteous, not because of their work, but because of their faith in God who forgives sinners.* ⁶ *David also spoke of this when he described the happiness of those who are declared righteous without working for it:* ⁷ *“Oh, what joy for those whose disobedience is forgiven, whose sins are put out of sight.* ⁸ *Yes, what joy for those whose record the Lord has cleared of sin.”*

⁹ *Now, is this blessing only for the Jews, or is it also for uncircumcised Gentiles? Well, we have been saying that Abraham was counted as righteous by God because of his faith.* ¹⁰ *But how did this happen? Was he counted as righteous only after he was circumcised, or was it before he was circumcised? Clearly, God accepted Abraham before he was circumcised!*

¹¹ *Circumcision was a sign that Abraham already had faith and that God had already accepted him and declared him to be righteous—even before he was circumcised. So Abraham is the spiritual father of those who have faith but have not been circumcised. They are counted as righteous because of their faith.* ¹² *And Abraham is also the spiritual father of those who have been circumcised, but only if they have the same kind of faith Abraham had before he was circumcised.*

¹³ *Clearly, God’s promise to give the whole earth to Abraham and his descendants was based not on his obedience to God’s law, but on a right relationship with God that comes by faith (Romans 4:1-13).*

The good news in Paul’s argument is that we Gentiles can be accepted into God’s family on the basis of our faith alone, just as Abraham was, since his faith preceded his circumcision. And there’s more good news, besides.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the First Baptist Church of Bristol, Virginia on April 25, 2010.

There's a fascinating sub-theme in the Bible about circumcision, a theme that applies to all of us, male and female, Jew and Gentile, and it goes all the way back to Moses. Beginning at the giving of the Ten Commandments, through the prophets and into the New Testament, including our text this morning, we find that circumcision has another, deeper, meaning. This sub-theme has to do with what the Bible calls the "**circumcision of the heart.**"²

Moses told Israel that "*the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live*" (Deuteronomy 30:6). Jeremiah told us that "*the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will punish all those who are circumcised merely in the flesh . . . all the house of Israel are uncircumcised in heart*" (Jeremiah 9:25-26).

And in today's text, Paul said that ²⁸ *you are not a true Jew just because you were born of Jewish parents or because you have gone through the ceremony of circumcision.* ²⁹ *No, a true Jew is one whose heart is right with God. And true circumcision is not merely obeying the letter of the law; rather, it is a change of heart produced by God's Spirit. And a person with a changed heart seeks praise from God, not from people* (Romans 2:28-29).

Paul has even more to say about this new circumcision in Colossians, where he wrote that ¹¹ *"When you came to Christ, you were 'circumcised,' but not by a physical procedure. Christ performed a spiritual circumcision—the cutting away of your sinful nature.* ¹² *For you were buried with Christ when you were baptized. And with him you were raised to new life because you trusted the mighty power of God, who raised Christ from the dead.* ¹³ *You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ, for he forgave all our sins.* ¹⁴ *He canceled the record of the charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross"* (Colossians 2:11-14).

And now we have a direct connection between the ancient practice of physical circumcision and the act of Christian baptism in which we've participated this morning with Jennifer. The act of being baptized as a follower of Jesus is a public proclamation that our sins have been covered by the Blood of Jesus, that we have entered into the New Covenant with the Father through the Spirit.

Baptism is also a public identification with and a public commitment to all other persons who acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God—those persons across the ages, past, present, and future, who constitute the spiritual, invisible Church, the Bride of Christ. And baptism has always marked the boundary between who is and who is not a member of the visible Church, the Body of Christ in the world today.

Such identification with the visible Church has, from the very beginning and even to this very moment, often meant significant persecution and sometimes death. In the early church, those who were about to receive baptism often spent the preceding night in a vigil of fasting and prayer, knowing that great suffering lay ahead.

Believer's baptism is the symbol of a rebirth that cuts life in two. When Dr. Nik Ripken was with us two weeks ago, he pointed out repeatedly that this is precisely how Christian baptism is understood by the Muslims with whom he works. Listen to his words:

"Islam is convinced that it is at [Christian] baptism that its sons and daughters have become separated from their former way of life. Islam identifies baptism as the time when the believer has died to the old way and embraced a new worldview. Though the image might be uncomfortable, it might even be suggested that baptism, given the worldview of Islam, is to a new believer in Christ

² Deuteronomy 10:16, 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4, 9:25-26; Ezekiel 44:9; Acts 7:51; Romans 2:29; Colossians 2:11-14.

what strapping on a belt of explosives is to a suicide bomber. For Islam, baptism is the point of no return.”³

Because baptism does indeed represent a rebirth that cuts life in two, baptism is a personal reenactment of the spiritual reality that *“I have been crucified with Christ. I myself no longer live, but Christ lives in me. So I live my life in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me”* (Galatians 2:20). It is such a new life, such a new worldview, such a new set of commitments, and such a new community of relationships into which Jennifer has entered this morning, and we with her.

With respect to the title of this message, many of us in this room can testify that there’s a lot of radical rethinking required after open heart surgery. We have to rethink what we eat, how we exercise . . . almost no area of our lives is unaffected after this life-saving and life-changing surgery. But that’s not the kind of heart surgery to which this message refers. I’m talking this morning about the surgery the Bible calls “circumcision of the heart,” and about the radical rethinking and reorientation of our lives that follows surgery of this deeper, eternal sort.

So far, I’ve made three points this morning. These points have been that:

1. Faith in Jesus, not physical circumcision, is the true sign of being in covenant with God.
2. Believer’s baptism symbolizes this spiritual “circumcision of the heart.”
3. Baptism is the symbol of a spiritual “heart surgery” that divides life in two. Life on the other side of this commitment is radically different, like dying and being reborn. We die to ourselves and our former way of life and now live in Christ.

I want to make one more point that I’ve been sorting through since listening to Dr. Ripken. What Dr. Ripken told us is a stretch for my mind and heart in a post-9/11 world, but I’m persuaded of its truth. What I’m about to tell you may offer one of the most significant strategies available to us for redirecting the course of human history in our time. What I’m about to tell you is an illustration of just how radically our understandings and our commitments are transformed when God “circumcises our hearts.”

Dr. Ripken has personally lost dozens, if not hundreds, of friends to death at the hands of Islamic persecutors; but even so, he told us repeatedly that “You need to overcome the stereotype that Muslims are the enemy. Muslims are not our enemy. Lostness is the enemy.”⁴ And Dr. Ripken has suggested a very specific plan of action by which you and I could make a difference in the lives of the many Muslims who come to our country to study, to work, and to live. Here’s the outline of his ten-point plan:

1. Intentionally welcome the Muslims in your midst. Shop where they shop. Look for ways to interact with them.
2. Pray in their neighborhoods and around their homes and schools and places of business.
3. Learn about their countries of origin and become conversant with current events in their home countries.
4. Make Muslims welcome in your home. Many Muslims report great loneliness in our country. Let them have a clear look into Christian homes and marriages.
5. Accept their invitations to share meals and to visit in their homes, if offered.

³ Nik Ripken, “Muslim Background Believers and Baptism in Cultures of Persecution and Violence,” pp. 4, 9.

⁴ Nik Ripken, “But this is a free country,” p. 6.

6. Learn all you can about Islam. Make it a habit to take gifts to their homes, especially during Islamic holidays.
7. Do all you can to learn their language and culture. The real key to sharing one's faith, even in the United States, is to pay the price to learn whatever heart languages are spoken in the homes of Muslims. There is no short cut. Agree to teach your Muslim friends English and American culture in return for their teaching you their language and culture.
8. Express genuine love for your faith community, but don't try to involve Muslims in church-based ministries. Meet with them in your home and in other places.
9. Live with complete integrity and with obvious love for God, for the Bible, and for your new friends. Live a life that is worthy of being copied.
10. Bathe these efforts in prayer. Prepare to do spiritual warfare. Remember that knowing Jesus is worth whatever it costs.⁵

I don't know about you, but that list challenges me. It makes me uncomfortable. It requires pretty drastic "heart surgery" to get patriotic Americans to undertake such a mission as this after 9/11 and all that has followed it. But Dr. Ripken's suggestions also sound a lot like "pushing back the Darkness." They sound a lot like causing God's Kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven.

It's a fine thing to give generously to our Global Missions and North American Missions Offerings, and we need to do that; but it may be an even finer thing to undertake the work of global missions ourselves, right here in Bristol, under the leadership of God's Spirit.

Would you be willing to undergo "heart surgery" of this sort? Will you join me in praying for God's direction? As we celebrate Jennifer's commitment to follow Jesus this morning, may we also be reminded of our own commitments, and become bolder in our own following of our Lord!

⁵ "But this is a free country," pp. 6-7.