

Sermon: Matters of the Heart  
Sunday, March 21, 2021  
Scripture: Psalm 51:1-12, Jeremiah 31:31-34  
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Today's first Scripture reading comes from Psalm 51, verses 1 through 12. This heartfelt cry to God is like a "true repentance" psalm, as it is known to be written during one of David's darkest moments in his life. This repentance leads us to remember David as a "man after God's own heart" (1 Sam 13:14). Let us join David's cry this morning as we hear the Word of the Lord.

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment. Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.

You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and sustain in me a willing spirit. Amen.

Our second Scripture reading on fifth Sunday of Lent is from the book of Jeremiah, chapter 31, verses 31 through 34. Often referred as the book of comfort, Jeremiah speaks of God's redemptive plan for Judah and Israel. Today's chapter is considered the "heart of the Book of Comfort," as God promises a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. Let us listen to the heart of the Lord through Prophet Jeremiah.

"The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the Lord. "This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the Lord. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the Lord. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." Amen.

**Leader:** This is the Word of the Lord.

**People:** Thanks be to God.

## *Meditation 3/21*

*Grace Batterman*

As I reflect on my time here at Westminster, I cannot help but smile at the thought of my incredible experience here. This church has offered me an outlook to see all the good this world has to offer. I often think back to Mission Week in the summer of 2020, where every morning, we would start off the day singing the theme song “Won’t you be my neighbor” before going out for a hard day’s work. Even amongst such a hard year for most, just like Mr. Rogers, Westminster continues to uplift so many different people. This has always been the case for me. I have learned from sermons, members of this congregation, experiences on mission trips, that there is always good in the world if you just choose to seek it out. Whether it is something as small as a hug from a friend or something as big as getting to help those in need during a week in the summer, God will be leading us.

In Psalm 51, the Psalmist says, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.” The key concept I take out of these verses restore me. Have hope that God is taking care of us and restoring us, it all really is just a matter of the heart. How you are going to perceive situations.

Whether you are going to be optimistic about it all or not. Every decision I have made has led me right here to this podium, speaking to a congregation that has led me to a lot of who I am today. All I have to do is walk through the doors of this building to know that good in this world will always outweigh the bad. The positive impact Westminster has had on my spiritual journey and my outlook on life itself is substantial.

One big lesson this church has taught me is that life is all about finding the little things that bring us joy. During my mission trip of 2019, I was able to experience and see so much beauty that God has put on this Earth. A couple of my good friends and I would get up at sunrise and write our kind cards with a beautiful view of mountains. It is something so simple as watching the sunrise or a small message written to you on a notecard, that can change your whole perspective. I think that Mr. Rogers has a beautiful take on this message. Instead of waking up thinking about how stressed this day could be or what terrible things may happen, wake up and think about every beautiful little thing that God has planned for you today. This is the lesson that I myself am going to take with me into the future and I encourage all of you too as well. I am so blessed that I am able to leave for college with the faith in me that God is leading me down the right path. I am also so incredibly blessed that I was able to grow up in this church. I always feel so loved and cared for when I am here and I know that when I head off to college I always have a place right here in this church to call home.

## *Church Sermon Sunday, March 21*

*Avery Pound*

The once popular show *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* is one before my time, but one that I have heard about over the years by other people of my generation but also of the older generations. While I have never seen an episode of Mister Rogers, it has clearly made a great impression upon people of all ages and occasionally I will hear people singing, whistling, or playing the world famous theme song “Won’t you be my neighbor” that later develops into the common lyrics of “it’s a beautiful day in the neighborhood.” This song alone gives off good vibes and all of the nostalgia around Mister Rogers is that of positivity, caring, and love. Every day that I have walked through the doors of this church I have always felt the same nostalgia that is associated with Mister Rogers. Members, visitors, youth, and staff, all bubbling with the love of God’s grace, milling about speaking with one-another about the different aspects of their unique, daily lives. Each time a new visitor opens the doors to this church, in

my lifetime I have always seen people immediately go over to talk to them and make them feel welcome in this brand new place. It is through this large church family that every day at Westminster is a beautiful day in the neighborhood.

Both passages from the Bible today relate back to the theme of loving one's neighbor and bringing positivity to all around. Mister Rogers is a great example of someone who reverberated these themes through his television series, and through all of his works with the Fred Rogers center. In the eyes of many, he was a walking image of how to love one's neighbor day in and day out. His messages, as well as the many messages of the Bible relating to this theme, have certainly gotten through to the crowd here at Westminster. Each and every Sunday since I began attending "Big Church," I hear about the ways that members and staff are loving our neighbors, by building ramps at Habitat for Humanity, preparing and delivering food for Meals on Wheels, and sending cards or phone calls to those who need it most. This church has helped geographical neighbors around the church by building fences, painting fences, siding, in the well named, Steadfast Neighbor Endeavor. However, we have not only helped neighbors within a few hundred yards of this beautiful building, teams of Westminster members have traveled thousands of miles to help our neighbors in Kenya, while other have travelled to Haiti or South Texas to help in relief efforts after the tragic events of Hurricane Harvey. This great youth group that I have been so blessed to be a part of has provided me opportunities to help my neighbors, through selling baked potatoes and zoom shopping on Amazon in this year's case, we have gifted thousands of dollars worth of Christmas Gifts to those who might not receive many otherwise. But what may be the most impactful thing to my growing up at Westminster has been the three mission trips to help our neighbors in Appalachia that I have been so fortunate to go on. The bonds between other youth on these trips has been something that I cannot overstate and the work that I have seen accomplished on houses and trailers are things unable to be done without loving your neighbor. Every year, seniors and youth stand up here preaching about the wonders that the youth mission trip is every year, and it is easy to see why. Not only have I been able to help neighbors in the rural mountains of Virginia, Tennessee and West Virginia receive a bedroom remodel, new wheelchair ramp, and a leak free roof, but I have met other neighbors from all parts of the country. These trips have done so much for me and I am so grateful that this wonderful church and youth group have blessed me with these opportunities. I have walked with God on these trips and seen the wonders God created. Being somewhat of a Mission trip veteran, one of the coolest things I have been able to see is the impact that the love from others has on first year people. ASP and WPC have been so gracious in blessing us all these opportunities and that is one of the places I have seen the influence of the Bible, and of Mister Rogers' themes. And every year that Sunday after mission trip, we all get to walk back to the beautiful neighborhood that we call Westminster Presbyterian Church, and retelling the stories of the neighbors we have helped. I am so grateful to be apart of this church and see the love of God's grace each week, season, and year in Westminster Presbyterian Church.

### *Matters of the Heart*

#### *Rev. Christian Choi*

I do not think it is a coincidence that today's church Lenten devotion is on Empathy, as we continue our 40 days, 40 prayers, 40 words by Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow. According to many recent psychology articles, average American college students in 2009 has scored as less empathic than 75% of students in 1979. If that trend is true, then it seems like the U.S. is going through an empathy deficit. Some may attribute empathy as a feeling, or as the ability to connect or imagine other's feelings, or just a feeling of relating to someone. None of these are wrong, as we notice the overarching concept is trying to understand what the other person might be going through and being concerned. Bruce Reyes-Chow starts today's devotion with a definition of empathy as the psychological identification with or vicarious experiencing of the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another. Whatever your definition of empathy might be, we are having less of putting ourselves in other person's shoes; in my biblical

imagination and interpretation, our hearts are turning back to be stones, which is contributing to many divisions and acts of hatred that is taking place around our nation.

Today's Scripture hints at God's unconditional, everlasting, and empathic heart toward all of us. God is creating a new covenant with us, although humanity has failed to keep our end of the previous covenant with God. The new covenant will be not a law that is written on the tablets of stone that is outside of ourselves to be observed, but it will be written on our hearts, an inward change. God has created in us a clean heart, a tablet of flesh, that is filled with God's Holy Spirit. A heart that can feel, hurt, and will ache for those who are in need around us, just like when God sees us – the child of God – who are being held captive by the brokenness of humanity.

As we lose empathy, our hearts are turning back into heart of stone – like the pharaoh's. Pharaoh also had moments of cries to the Lord, when the infliction through the plagues were painful enough, but soon after changed back. God does not want us to have a heart of stone. God does not want to have a visitation relationship with us when we are only hurting. God wants for us to have a holy habitation relationship, a temple within our hearts; a heart made of flesh.

So let us ask the Lord to create in us a clean, new heart made of flesh with a right spirit within us. That we may see within each other, the joy of our salvation, that we may see the other and see the image of God, and say that it's you I like, every part of you. Amen.