

“The Renewed Heart” based on Jeremiah 31:31-34

Preached by Rev. Jonathan New

First Congregational Church (UCC), Burlington, VT — March 25, 2012

It’s that season again. Not spring or mud season. That season that seems to expand each time it rolls around. The silly season. Presidential election season. And like other elections this one’s dominated by a burning issue. No, not Health Care. Not even the economy. Something even dearer to us that factors in every US election — character. And though financing is important, when it comes to a candidate’s electability, the proverb, “A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold” couldn’t be truer. It’s a candidate’s reputation — not record — that’s most under scrutiny.

Reputation is important. But after being disappointed so often, Americans are digging deeper, for character lies below the thin veneer of reputation. While reputation’s merely what others think you are, character’s a person’s true traits or qualities, her pattern of behavior, her moral constitution. It’s more like who we really are.

The story’s told of a travelling preacher who stopped for the night at an inn. Not long after he’d fallen asleep other folks came to the inn to gamble and drink. Before long, some money was missing and they were arguing at the top of their lungs. Hearing the ruckus, the preacher got up to see what the trouble was. “Quiet down!” he told them. “Give me a little help and I’ll solve everything.”

The preacher had the door bolted shut, and called for a rooster and a big old kettle from the fireplace. After he’d covered the rooster with the kettle and the fireplace as well, he blew out all the lamps. “It’s a known fact that covered roosters always catch a thief,” said the preacher. “Now, everyone come up and touch the kettle. When the thief puts a finger on it, the rooster will crow and I’ll grab him.”

People shuffled up through the dark to touch the kettle but the rooster never crowed. “Sorry,” said the preacher. “Must be a sickly rooster. Re-light the lamps and stir up the fire.” But, as the light came up, the preacher exclaimed, “Got ‘em,” and grabbed a man by the collar. He’d caught the thief.

How? Worried that the rooster might actually crow, the thief had not touched the old kettle. His hands were the only ones without any soot from its bottom. What that preacher knew and what this preacher believes is that true character’s revealed in how we behave under cover of darkness or behind closed doors. As Will Rogers said when commenting on how to cultivate good character, “So live that you wouldn’t be ashamed to sell the family parrot to the town gossip.”

But there's the rub. Is good character something we can cultivate or change at all? After all, character formation's a process. It's been said, "Sow an act and you reap a habit. Sow a habit and you reap a character." Character's the product of countless choices made throughout our lives, and it's not easily reformed. We may say we want to change but there are all those inner dispositions and habitual traits — difficult to go against — that make us who we are. As St. Paul wrote, "I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate... I can will what is right, but I cannot do it."

If you've ever tried to help someone turn his life around you know what kind of struggle character reform is. There are few things more frustrating than making the attempt when what you're offering is against her basic disposition. Right? There's something within us, deeper than mere faults and foibles, that keeps making us into the sort of person who can know what is right, but can't do the right, and therefore keep us going over and over again the same self-destructive behaviors that bring us to grief. This is why, in his despair, the psalmist pleads, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me."

Well, there is hope; at least, the prophet Jeremiah thought so. He spoke of a new day when God would write a covenant, God's law, not merely on stone tablets but on our hearts.

Jeremiah rejected as untrue to God's nature the kind of covenant where we must keep certain stipulations or suffer punishment. C.S. Lewis said that if you've tried to be a friend to someone in need, sincerely trying to help that person get his or her life in order, and have been frustrated, you've caught a glimpse of what it must feel like to be God. So often, we give up. God doesn't. To me, that's the essence of the Bible's message. It's the story people's faithlessness and God's continual desire to forge a renewed relationship. God doesn't let us go simply because we are not the creatures we were intended to be.

More important, God doesn't merely offer us good advice, a set of laws we ought to obey, even though we can't. Jeremiah looked to the day when God would inscribe and store God's law within our decision-making mechanism, our value-judgement center, our consciousness controller — the heart. With this new covenant the law would be a part of us, and we'd know God's way in our very being.

This isn't just about the power to be do-gooders. The purpose of this new covenant and hearts made new isn't God getting us to do what God wants. It's about healing the rift between God and humanity. God says, "When I make this new covenant, when I renew their hearts, they shall all know me... for I will forgive them." This is a new beginning in the divine-human relationship and one grounded in a wholly new act of divine grace — the forgiveness of sins. With

every barrier removed, people will “know” God, have communion with God, intimately.

During Lent, we consider the notion that it was Jesus who was the first to enter into this new covenant — the first to have a heart so in sync with God’s and who opened the way for us to follow — the opportunity to realize something about God — that God offers love and that we can abide in that love always.

No doubt, it’s difficult being the people God has called us to be. Yet the God revealed to us by Jesus is the God who refuses to be stumped by our constant turning toward the wrong — the God who keeps returning to us. And this is the good news of Easter: For each of us who ever struggled in vain with destructive forces within us, God will transform our hearts, raising us from our spiritual death to lives renewed. For each of us who’s ever longed to be reunited with our loving Creator, at Easter, God’s true, completely loving nature is fully revealed, and a new way of being with God was demonstrated. Jesus opens a door for us. The question is whether we have the desire and the will to walk through to new life. May we carry this question and such discernment into the coming Holy Week and beyond.