

And now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul,¹³ and to observe the LORD's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?

¹⁴ To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it. ¹⁵ Yet the LORD set his affection on your forefathers and loved them, and he chose you, their descendants, above all the nations, as it is today. ¹⁶ Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer. ¹⁷ For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. ¹⁸ He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. ¹⁹ And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt. ²⁰ Fear the LORD your God and serve him. Hold fast to him and take your oaths in his name. ²¹ He is your praise; he is your God, who performed for you those great and awesome wonders you saw with your own eyes. ²² Your forefathers who went down into Egypt were seventy in all, and now the LORD your God has made you as numerous as the stars in the sky. (Deuteronomy 10:12-22)

We are Called to a Life of Faith

I read an article this week about seven habits that can change your life. Number one was cultivating a positive attitude. The author talked about recognizing your negative “self-talk” so you can switch to something positive. He recommended something that seems very intrusive to me: carrying a pad and writing down every negative thought you have so that you can identify the trends across your life and then change. Whether keeping that kind of log works or not, I know from pastoral counseling that changing your negative “self-talk” really means changing your entire approach to life. And the same could be said about many areas of our lives. If you have a chronic weight problem, the solution is usually a lifestyle change. If you drink too much, if you're not disciplined about work or cleaning your house, if you're disorganized and can't ever find anything and you're always late, usually it takes a sweeping revamp of your approach to life to overcome that issue. What kind of life do you live? What kind of life do you want to live? All those other issues are important, but at the heart of our lives is our faith. For months, I've been telling you that the Pentecost season is about our Christian lives. Today, on the last Sunday of Pentecost, God reminds us: **we are called to a life of faith.**

I.

The person calling us, of course, is God. This morning, Moses speaks for God to the people of Israel. He tells them what that life looks like. **A life of faith is a based on God's love.** God's love is always concrete. We don't always think of love that way. We are emotional people and we like warmth and feelings. But on a practical level, we all recognize that love is useless if it doesn't do anything. I love my children. But if I don't provide for them, if I don't take time for them, if I don't listen to them and help them, what good is my emotion? So when God speaks of his love for his people, he emphasizes what it leads him to do for that people.

Moses says that the maker and owner of the universe chose them. Out of all the people that would ever live, God set his affection on the ancestors of Israel, on Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The Hebrew literally says that God bound himself to love them. No human being could ever make God do anything. But God tied himself down to those ancestors. This is the most emotional statement God makes in this passage. Even here, he makes it clear that his love was a choice, an act of will that he undertook for their ancestors. And because God bound himself to love them, he chose their descendants, the nation of Israel, to be his special people. He gave them a place above every other nation on earth at that time. He did the same things for us. Before the world began, God chose us. God chose to make the Christian Church his new people. God gave us the same faith he gave Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Jesus says that all who believe in him are children of Abraham. God declared us to be a part of that one people on earth that he loves above all else. He bound himself to love us.

But God did more. To Israel, Moses said, **“He is your praise; he is your God, who performed for you those great and awesome wonders you saw with your own eyes. Your forefathers who went down into Egypt were seventy in all, and now the LORD your God has made you as numerous as the stars in the sky.”** God is Israel's praise – her glory. The greatest glory for a people does not come from military victories or from great art and literature or from wealth and commerce. The real reason to praise Israel was her God. She

belonged to the Lord. She was God's chosen mouthpiece on this earth. And she provided the human ancestry of Christ. To make her his own, God did amazing miracles. He sent the ten plagues to devastate Egypt and to set Israel free. He went ahead of Israel through the desert in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. He divided the Red Sea and brought his people safely through on dry land and then he drowned the army of Egypt when they tried to follow. He gave them manna in the desert for forty years. He appeared to the whole nation at Mt. Sinai and gave them his law. And to do all that, he took a clan of nomads who settled in Egypt to escape a famine and he made them into a nation at least two million strong when Moses read these words.

Every one of those things has a parallel in the Christian Church. We are the people of God and our glory will never be found in ruling our society or in beautiful art or great literature or in the wealth of our churches or our members. Our real praise is that God is with us, that we are his spokesmen today. Jesus was not born from us, but God does call us the body of Christ. To make us his own, God did even greater miracles than he did for Israel. Now, they weren't nearly as obvious. No parting of the Red Sea for us, no plague on the first born, no fire and smoke on Mt. Sinai. No, for us, God made himself a man. The Son of God who fills all space entered the single cell of a fetus in the womb of the Virgin Mary. God the all-powerful made himself a baby who had to be fed and protected and changed and kept warm. God the all-knowing grew up and studied and learned. And all the while he was still God, still capable of all that God is.

That God man laid down his life for us on the cross. God – God the Son – died. And then God rose. The greatest miracle is that God made all that count for us. We are holy because he was. Our sins are paid for because he died. We are forgiven because he rose. From the 120 members of the first congregation in Jerusalem, God has created a worldwide Christian church on earth. It numbers more than one billion people today. Only God knows how many truly have faith, but we are a great host of believers who will praise his name in heaven forever.

Why did God shower all that love on us? Not because we deserved it. In that regard we're just like Israel. We are proud and stubborn and we like our own opinions way too much. We were born sinners and all too often, even today, even after coming to faith, we treat his love like something that isn't all that important. But God chose us. He loved us in Christ. He reached into our hearts and gave us faith in what Jesus did. God's love makes our life of faith – our life springs from his love. God calls us to live a life based on his love.

II.

So what does that life look like? Because we're all individuals, it's going to look a little different in every one of our lives. But every true life of faith obeys what God commands because of the change God has made in our hearts. **A life of faith reflects a new heart.**

Moses asked: **“And now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the LORD's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?”** Does that sound like heart stuff or like stuff we're supposed to do? “Fear the Lord” means to reverence him. That's an attitude of the heart. But walking in God's ways and observing his decrees and laws means doing stuff. Even loving God always means action in the Bible and, of course, so does serving God. But notice, what God says about serving him: “Serve the LORD your God with all your heart and all your soul.” When God looks at what we do and say, he's always looking at what we think and feel. If our heart and soul belong to God, then all we do every day of our lives will turn into service. We'll serve him in our marriages, in our parenting, in our work and in our play. It will be a lifestyle change.

God says, **“Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer.”** If there was ever a passage that underlined the importance of the heart in obeying God, it's this one. To the Jews of Jesus' day, the physical act of circumcision was the heart of being Jewish. But God said, “Circumcise your heart.” He said it through Moses way back at the beginning of Israel's nationhood. Obviously, he doesn't mean that there should be some kind of physical heart surgery. He was saying that the sign God gave to Abraham was supposed to be a sign of faith. The Jews were supposed to circumcise their children as a sign of the trust in their hearts that God had made them his people. The faith was always the most important part. Circumcise your hearts means dedicate them to the Lord. You don't have to be a boy baby to circumcise your heart. Every believer dedicates themselves to God. Every believer commits himself or herself to a lifelong struggle against the sin we're born with. Every believer trusts in God and lives for him. So these words do apply to us, even

though we live two thousand years after the Old Testament command to circumcise expired. In the New Testament, God said it a little differently. He said that God gave us a new heart when he gave us faith.

To show how important that new heart, circumcised heart is, God continued with a threat. He is the God of gods and Lord of lords – that’s a Hebrew way of saying no one is higher than God is. He is the ruler and the judge all. Moses says that he shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. So even though Israel was his chosen people, even though he bound himself to love her, when he acts as a judge – if they come before him on the basis of what they have done – they get no special treatment. And neither do we.

God warned Israel, **“He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt.”** In the ancient world, orphans and widows and foreigners lived very precarious lives. No one would come to their rescue. They were often enslaved or robbed or murdered. But God called his people to remember that they were once foreigners and slaves in Egypt. He called them to show compassion to the helpless in their society. God warned them that he loves the unlovable and he helps the helpless. If the hearts of the people of Israel were not full of his love and if it did not come out in their lives, they would face his judgment.

God calls us to do the same, to have compassion on those who are helpless and in need. Do we do that? Who is in need, in our day? Every person who doesn’t know Jesus is in need of the gospel. Do we share it? Every person who is struggling with sickness or poverty or hurt or loneliness is in need of the love that God showed us. Are our hearts new and full of that love? Or should we face God’s judgment? No matter how often we have tried to do this, can any of us claim that we have always shared the good news, always helped the poor, always lived for God? No. We’re sinners, through and through and we deserve nothing but death and hell.

But Jesus came and he made himself nothing for us. He gave all that he was to the poor, he gave himself. He never stopped sharing the gospel. And he lived a life of compassion for those God loved. God calls us holy because Jesus lived for us. He died and he paid for all the times we failed those God calls us to help. Jesus rose, and God says our sin is gone. God did those great acts of mercy and salvation for us and we are free. Now, God has given us a new heart. With that new heart, God has given us true compassion. You may not always feel it, because your sinful nature gets in the way. But it is always there. Now, and for the rest of our lives, let us commit ourselves to serving Christ by showing love to each other and to all people.

God has called us to a life of faith. That will look different in each of our lives, but in every believer’s life, it means a complete change. That change begins in our hearts, but it runs through every aspect of our lives. It grows as we grow in our appreciation for God’s love for us. Then the new heart that God gave us comes out in our words and our actions, in our acts of love and mercy to the lost, to the hurting, to those in need. May God lead us all to live that life. Amen.