

CHANGE OF HEART

A COMMENTARY FOR EASTER, 2012

LAST IN A 4-PART SERIES, "MATTERS OF THE HEART"

*"There is a crack in everything.
That's how the light gets in."*

Anthem, songwriter Leonard Cohen

FIRST, A SUMMARY

RETROSPECTIVE ON THIS SERIES:

This "Matters of the Heart" series has asked, what is the essential message of Jesus; that, in response, one might accord to him such titles as Lord and Christ, and try to follow his example?

The first commentary in the series looked at the common human affliction, known in the biblical tradition as *hardness of heart*. Revisiting the story of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11), and her would-be judges, we considered how a *Heart of Stone* results when we are inclined to cast stones, lest we drop them on our own two guilty feet.

In the second commentary, we checked in for a night at the *Heartbreak Hotel*, because we've all known the experience of heartache and loss. Taking another look at the gospel story of Jesus driving legitimate commerce out of the Jerusalem temple (John 2:13-22), we considered the historical reality that it was not so much an expression of righteous indignation on the part of the early church's construction of this tale; but rather the heartache they must have felt that the physical place where they once brought their search for meaning in the face of loss (the temple) had – by the time the gospel story was written – already been reduced to rubble.

Moreover, when they attribute to Jesus the claim he could rebuild the temple in three days, the reference to his resurrection is surely meant to convey something other than his own physical reconstruction; let alone the need for a place of brick and mortar along the path. As such, it

foretells a more profound understanding of Easter; which we would do well to grasp, appreciate and emulate in our own lives.

The third commentary considered the only thing needed to *Mend a Broken Heart*. The parable of the prodigal son, his father and elder brother reminds us that when it comes to matters of the heart, sometimes not even forgiveness (and rarely self-justified moral rectitude) is not always possible, and sometimes insufficient anyway. Instead, it's about the *compunction of compassion*; that is, the capacity to embrace one's greatest heartache with something that renders *everything* else to be of no consequence whatsoever.

But now in this last commentary, when we finally arrive at an Easter destination and the culmination of these *Matters of the Heart*, we discover the place to which we have finally come is empty! If nothing else, all the different accounts provided in the various gospels of the empty tomb story are about *the absence of what once was, and is no more*. Not only that, but one other thing is clear. Everything changes. That is, at least, for those who would undertake such a journey.

When the women come to the tomb and find the stone has been rolled away before the break of day, the new dawn's light shines through that crack that is in everything; including the stone-cold and broken hearts in need of mending. (Mark 16:1-8)

And the Easter alleluia to be sung is one that bids us have a *Change of Heart*.

A CHANGE OF HEART



So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" [Luke 24:30-32]

Left, *Supper at Emmaus*, Artist: He Qi , 2001.

A couple weeks ago former Vice President Dick Cheney got himself a new heart. His old ticker hadn't been working very well for a long, long time, and he needed a new one.

Controversy surrounded his advanced age and whether the former VP had gotten special consideration. But the fact of the matter is, no one *deserves* a new heart. One can only receive it as a gift, freely given by someone willing to give you the one they have that still works. And that only happens when the donor has died and has no further use of it. Think Passion Play.

His critics might suggest, if ever anyone needed a change of heart, it was Dick Cheney. Over the years, the cold calculations with which he had strategized and orchestrated the attacks on his perceived enemies – both foreign and domestic – seem to have taken their toll. So he got a new heart.

Now perhaps the only question that remains is whether the new Dick will feel any differently than the old one? Will he see anything differently? Might he become someone else, as a result of a softer heart beating in his chest? Will a change of hearts give him the one thing he could not give himself; namely, a new life?

Few of us will ever go through the ordeal of a heart transplant. So, for those of us who must live with the one we've got, it might still be

worth asking the same question: When all is said and done, what is it that ultimately lies at the heart of the matter? What matters most? And does it require more than just simply changing our minds and the way we think about it all?

As difficult as it may be to accept it, the answer to that question may be staring us in the face. This is what the *empty tomb message* of Easter – that mythic tale told and re-told in a variety of gospel accounts -- is ultimately all about; about the passing away of the old, worn-out things that don't work anymore; and the need to replace them – not simply revive them -- with something new that has within it the promise of a life worth living.

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So upfront, here's where I'm going in the next few pages. It may sound a bit like a political commentary, considering the examples I use for illustration purposes only, but hear me out:

First, Easter is not a "reset" button. It's not an Etch-a-Sketch moment in time, that turns time into eternity; or where you get to do the same old thing all over again, and again, and again.

Moreover, Easter isn't even simply about changing one's mind; as in, for example, settling once and for all in one's own mind whatever you think an Easter "resurrection" could mean, once and for all eternity. This is a self-reminder. I used to think differently than I do now, and I'm not done.

And finally, if Easter is about anything, it is about a change of heart. Because that's where it all begins and ends.

I. EASTER IS NOT A "RESET" ETCH-A-SKETCH MOMENT

Eric Fehrstrom, an advisor to presidential hopeful Mitt Romney, created a problem for his candidate when he referred to the strategic shift that he suggested would be required when moving from the nomination contest to a general election.

"I think you hit a reset button for the fall campaign," he said. "Everything changes. It's almost like an Etch A Sketch. You can kind of shake it up and restart all over again."

While everyone understands a successful politician is often one who has acquired the craft of speaking out of both sides of one's mouth, opponents and pundits immediately pounced on the opportunity to portray Eric's candidate as an unprincipled, vacillating charlatan who'll do and say anything to win. He'll feign to be the real deal; then merely reinvent himself when a better deal comes along.

Now, an equity turnaround specialist who has honed such a skill with a career in leveraged buyouts could be regarded as an Etch-a-Sketch Master. While critics might argue that in the practice of such free-market capitalism, there is sometimes a heartless disregard for the casualty count, others might counter such is the regrettable consequence of what amounts to economic triage. To save investor's capital and some of the workers, other jobs have to go. Such is life, as some would define it.

But here's the two-fold dilemma with an Etch-a-Sketch approach to politics, and life in general. It comes at the perilous risk of alienating one constituency, in order to appeal to another. Try to satisfy both and you run the chance of committing the ultimate sin of changing ones' mind.

On the other hand, Easter has no "reset" button. Contrary to popular opinion, it's not an Etch-a-Sketch moment in time, that turns time into eternity; where you get to do the same old thing all over again, and again, and again.

And it comes with the inherent reality that one can change one's mind; if, in fact, one's heart has first been changed. What might that look like?

II. MY FRIEND MITT

In the mid-sixties, Mitt and I were classmates. I remember him as just another goofy teenager, hanging out in the dorm room across the hall. He was an upperclassman and the son of the state's governor at a prestigious prep school outside Detroit. I was a preacher's kid attending Cranbrook on partial scholarship.

We both dated and married our high school sweethearts from the adjoining girl's prep school. Mitt went on to become a wildly-successful businessman and national political figure. I went into the professional ministry, to pastor a modest congregation for many years in relative obscurity.

When we were both well along in our adult careers, I once wrote a personal letter to my old classmate when he was then governor of Massachusetts. At the time, the state legislature was debating the hot potato topic of gay marriage; and the governor's office appeared to be siding with the majority of the populist opinion in opposition to the idea at the time, according to the ever-present polls.

My experience ministering one-on-one to real people for many years had reaffirmed my belief that any blatant disregard of those things that constitute the bonds by which we are willing to

try to love each other is not simply discriminatory and therefore illegitimate, but heartless as well. I thought perhaps my old friend would find my keen insights helpful.

In reply, I received a form letter from the governor's office several months later, thanking me for sharing my "highly valued" thoughts on whatever matter I'd happened to write.

Well, I was touched ... But more than touched, I was sorry I had not changed my old friend's mind. Obviously -- for our own separate reasons, and from our two very different perspectives -- we did not see things the same way. It made me wonder if one has to change one's mind, before one has a change of heart; or if perhaps it happens the other way around?

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III. THE GOV CHANGES HIS MIND

All this made me think of Mitt's dad, George. When we were in boarding school, then-Governor George Romney would visit on occasion. I'd see his long black limo pull up behind Stevens Hall, and think nothing of it. State politics were of little interest. The times they were a'changin' and I was busy learning to play and mimic Bob Dylan's edgy protest songs. The civil rights movement had captivated the national spotlight, and the widening American war in Southeast Asia had an unwelcome implication for my registering for the draft when I turned eighteen and graduated in 1966.

As it turned out, the following year Gov. Romney had aspirations to seek the Republican nomination for president, in an attempt to defeat the Democratic incumbent.

Two years earlier, after a briefing tour of the war zone led by U.S. military brass, Gov. Romney had stated his whole-hearted support

of the U.S. led war in Vietnam, stating unequivocally it was "morally right and necessary."

But only two years later, in an infamous interview with a Detroit television reporter, he said he'd changed his mind. After a deeper study of the history of the region, he'd concluded committing U.S. ground troops in an Asian land war had been a "tragic" blunder. He came to realize he'd initially been mistaken, saying, "When I first came back from Viet Nam, I'd just had the greatest brainwashing anybody can get."

The remark abruptly ended any chance of further political aspirations. The governor had committed the unpardonable sin in American politics, which I suspect his son remembers well and strives to avoid. No successful politician could ever be perceived as being susceptible to brainwashing and changing positions.

What was never clear in his father's case, however, was if George's momentary lapse in political savvy merely stemmed from a level-headed assessment of a purely pragmatic matter; or if he had subsequently considered the deliberate infliction of human death and suffering on such a massive scale and the tragic consequences of such utter folly, felt the pain of our perceived enemies, and had *had a change of heart*.

What was the "take-away" from this two-part story? For me, it would be this: It may take the courage of one's newfound convictions to change one's mind, and bear the consequences; but it may assuage the fallout from such a fool-hearty decision if first it stems from a change of heart.

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IV. A CHANGE OF HEART CALLED EASTER

A preacher's kid can hardly escape all the Bible lessons and religious observances throughout the year, year after year, after year. So, from earliest childhood, I remember hearing the Easter tales about the empty tomb and those strange post-resurrection appearance stories of Jesus where he seems to show up sometimes in the flesh, other times only in spirit, and sometimes both.

So after picturing those horrific stories retold each year about Jesus' agonizing death on the cross, I was always happy to be reminded it turned out so well for him in the end.

But it all never made any sense to me really; about exactly *how* God had finally figured out how to save *us* all by letting his "only-begotten son" get killed off; only to then bring him back in a way that frankly didn't look much different than what appeared to me to be a pretty grim and grubby way of life to begin with.

Why not just skip that brief and inexplicable return, and instead just ascend straight to heaven; simply leaving behind a memo to the faithful, "I'll be back?"

For me, it wasn't until I was willing to engage these tales again as a young adult in studies about the use of religious language that I was able to separate the *relative* importance of fact from the deeper truths to be found in fiction; and how the power of such mythic tales to convey certain truths can compel us to even try to experience how they might be lived out in real life.

So, resurrection was not about resuscitation, after all; or the immortality of my own mortal being.

And, understanding how Christianity had emerged as a counterpart to numerous so-called pagan religions – all of whom had their own gods who died and rose again -- did not leave me disillusioned with a dismantled childhood faith I had already left far behind.

So too, the fact that we have no idea whether Jesus ever uttered so many of the things the different gospel traditions attribute to him not only leads me to be willing to change my mind about how much authority should be accorded some long-held "gospel truths" perpetuated by a highly-politicized and compromised human institution, known as the Church.

It also compelled me to go deeper into considering what it was that was clearly set ablaze in the hearts of those early believers. And further, what yet remains at the heart of the matter, as reflected in the essential character of Jesus.

So I found I was not only able to change my mind about such fanciful tales; but more importantly, I was able to be open to the as-yet unknown ways in which they gave depth and meaning to the way I saw everything else, as well.

I know if one lives long enough to die a few *little deaths* along the way, we can – by something beyond our own doing that one usually just calls grace -- become our own death and resurrection story. And, like these arcane Easter stories, it has as much to do with the heart as the head.

Contrary to popular opinion perhaps, I've learned when it comes to both politics and religion it's good to have the capacity to change one's mind. But I've also learned it's equally hard to change someone else's mind; unless they have first had a change of heart, as well.

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This season we've looked at the heart of stone and the broken hearted. I'd always thought the greatest expression of anything that comes close to pure charity -- as a mending of those two hearts -- was to be found in the willingness to forgive, and the

subsequent redemptive possibility of reconciliation.

Now I've learned it's that *compunction of compassion* alone that comes from somewhere beyond our own conjuring, and holds within it not only the capacity to not only mend a cold or broken heart, but let a new one burn within us, as well.

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