



**Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA**

**Rev. Scott E. Schul**

**7th Sunday after Pentecost: July 19, 2020**

**Sermon Title: "The Undivided Heart"**

**Sermon Text: Psalm 86:11**

"Give me an undivided heart to revere your name." It's nothing but half a verse from a Psalm that most theologians dismiss as relatively inconsequential. For over four decades of my life I didn't pay any attention to this psalm or these nine little words. If I ever read them, I certainly didn't recall them. And maybe today when *you* heard these words from Psalm 86, you had a similar reaction.

"Give me an undivided heart to revere your name." This little prayer is easily overlooked within the mountain of words that comprise the Book of Psalms. But when I finally savored this verse in my last year of seminary, it became my favorite verse in the entire Bible, and quickly made a nest in my soul.

"Give me an undivided heart to revere your name." This verse hit me so hard because it was as if the psalmist knew my story and could tell it even better than me. The verse diagnosed all of the shortcomings, brokenness, and unhappiness I had ever felt, and illuminated all the longings that had led me, like the prodigal son, back to Jesus. An undivided heart is a heart *set only* on Jesus, *focused only* on Jesus, *tuned only* to Jesus, and *dedicated only* to Jesus. In contrast, a divided heart is scattered. Ever had a day when your to-do list was too long and your day too short? You frantically careen from task-to-task, never able to fully devote your attention to just one thing, and end up tired, frustrated, and disappointed in your lackluster results. It's the same with a divided heart.

Some days being a Christian feels like standing on an earthquake fault line, with one leg on either side as the ground shakes and splits down the middle. At some point you must commit to one side or the other, or become split just like the ground itself. It's a dangerous place to be. *You* know that. So maybe today the Holy Spirit's nudging you to pray this prayer: "Lord, give me an undivided heart to revere your name."

To desire an undivided heart is to embark on a lifetime journey with Christ. It begins simply with a desire to *love* him more *fully* and *know* him more *completely*. It's ultimately a surrender to the power and primacy of love. After all, *God is love*. You can't separate God's *identity* from God's *being* and *doing*. The same is true of Jesus Christ. Love is who he *is*. Love is what he *does*. And love is what he lavishes on *us*. There's no greater joy and peace than realizing that everything you've ever *needed* and everything you've ever *longed for* can be found just by centering your heart on the Son of God, who offers us forgiveness, mercy, salvation, new life, and a new beginning as *gifts of faith*. In Jesus Christ, our fractured lives and souls can

finally rest in the unity of love. It's a priceless gift. And so we pray, "Lord, give me an undivided heart to revere your name."

But if an undivided heart is such a wonderful thing, why do we so often feel painfully divided? Today's Bible readings help answer that question. For example, in our reading from Isaiah, God makes an impassioned plea, similar to the First Commandment, that there *is* and can only *be one* God. The children of Israel, living in painful exile, had drifted to false gods, largely because they were afraid. We live in fearful times as well, don't we? And so during this pandemic, many have sought to escape the *uncertainty*, the feeling of being *overwhelmed*, and the unrelenting *fear* by sitting in front of our TVs, *binge watching*, or parked in front of our fridges, *binge eating*. Curiously enough, I haven't heard of anyone *binge praying* or *binge reading* their Bible. Is it possible that in the fear and disruption of the pandemic our hearts have become divided? And so we pray, "Lord, give me an undivided heart to revere your name."

Paul's letter to the Romans offers another reason why our hearts become divided and we drift from Christ. *We forget who we are*. Paul pleaded with the Romans to remember that they are not slaves to their basest desires. They – like us – have received a spirit of adoption and are part of God's family with the same bright and secure future as Jesus himself. Does that mean we are immune from this world's sufferings? Of course not. We are no more exempt than was Jesus. But sometimes we get so caught up in the daily struggle that we overlook the bigger picture of God's love and provision for us. Other times our hyper-rational brains dismiss God's loving promises as a too-good-to-be-true fable. Consequently, we *drift* from our Lord. We *squander* our potential. We *starve* ourselves of the very things that help us to live and thrive. Yes, we forget who we are. Friends, "for greater things you were born."<sup>1</sup> And so we pray, "Lord, give me an undivided heart to revere your name."

Today's Gospel lesson also illustrates why our hearts so easily become divided. The parable reminds us that evil has long been a reality in our world. But the parable also teaches us that evil's presence neither surprises nor rattles God. God's response to evil is level-headed patience and planning. For a season at least, God allows evil to exist alongside good, because to eradicate evil at this time would cause the eradication of good too. And so God responds with love for us, by graciously tending and nourishing us, while giving us time to grow, mature, and develop.

Friends, we cannot allow ourselves to surrender to despair at the trials and tribulations of this world. Those evils do not signify God's absence *from* us or God's condemnation *of* us. Likewise, we cannot surrender to bitter judgmentalism, thinking we get to decide who is the *wheat* and who is the *weed*. Instead, embrace hope, trusting that God will, in God's time and way, lovingly provide for us and decisively deal with evil. Hand your burdens over to Jesus so your heart can heal, and pray, "Lord, give me an undivided heart to revere your name."

So what do we do when we feel disconnected, lost, adrift, and divided? Well, an old fashioned name for a pastor in the German Lutheran tradition is "seelsorger." It means someone "who provides care for the soul, a physician for souls."<sup>2</sup> So if you suspect your *spiritual* heart is divided, give Pastor Hetrick or me a call, just as you would call a physician if you thought your *physical* heart might be sick. Guided by God's Word and the Holy Spirit, let's have a

conversation about where you're *at* in your spiritual life and where you want to *be*. As physicians for souls, give us the opportunity to diagnose the situation and offer a remedy in Jesus Christ.

Remedies, as we all know, aren't always pleasant. For the past month or two I've been seeing a chiropractor because I have a couple bones in my back that insist on getting out of place. And so each week she shoves them back where they should be. Some days I leave the office feeling worse than when I walked in, but over time my bones and muscles are gradually relearning how God intended them to function, and as a result I'm feeling *much* better. The same is true as we tend our souls. Our hearts won't become undivided overnight, and the process of healing might involve a little discomfort. But we confidently persevere, because Jesus is our cure, and he never gives up on us. By his grace we *can* retrain and transform the muscles of our soul to better bind our fractured heart together so we can experience the fullness of joy in Jesus Christ.

Well, friends, we've spent an awful lot of time on a tiny handful of words in an obscure psalm. But God works through tiny things, and so maybe *now* the Spirit's churning in your heart. Maybe *now* you're ready for a fresh start. And maybe it begins today, with this simple prayer: "Lord, give me an undivided heart to revere your name." Amen.

#### Citations

<sup>1</sup> This was a favorite saying of a beloved Mexican Carmelite nun named Mother Luisita (1866-1937).

<sup>2</sup> Harold L. Senkbeil, *The Care of Souls: Cultivating a Pastor's Heart*. Lexham Press.