Our Lord Jesus promised us that He would be with us always, even unto the close of the age. He fulfills that promise in the person of the Holy Spirit. This Counselor, Helper, and Comforter reminds us of all that Jesus taught. He is around us and within us wherever we go. He nurtures us, comforts us, guides, and corrects us when necessary. We can count on His presence with us no matter where we are and no matter what we experience.

In retrospect, my dear and precious mother had a profound faith and trust in the Holy Spirit. It gave her a sweet joy all through her life and a solid confidence to face any challenge before her, and there were many. Her unshakable trust in the Holy Spirit was one of her gifts to me. Learning to trust in Him and to surrender to Him enabled both my mother and me to live and embrace life to the fullest. The result of her trust in the Holy Spirit was a very practical approach to Christian faith and a very practical application of that faith in daily living. She was not well versed in deep theological doctrine, and she did not have a dogmatic list of “do’s” and “don’ts.” For her it was not only what one believed, but how one lived out that belief. How did it impact one’s daily life and relationships? This was exemplified in some of her favorite phrases. Some of these phrases might seem very simplistic and a little folksy, but I assure you that given my lifelong experience with her, they were based on a deep and abiding faith in God, a close relationship with Jesus, and a profound trust in the Holy Spirit.
One of those phrases that I heard on occasion as a result of my frustration and mournful reaction to the snotty things that other kids, even my brother, said about me (and kids can and do say some very hurtful things to one another) was simply, “Now just don’t pay any attention to them.” That is sometimes easier said than done, especially when the remarks were cutting and hurtful. She was not discounting my feelings, and she was not denying the fact that affirmation and encouragement from other people are important. There was always a subtext when she said those things. In this case, she was trying to teach me that in the end, “Whose opinion really matters?”

From where does our true sense of self-esteem and self-worth come? How do we know that we are lovable, that we are valuable, that our life has meaning? She taught her children that in the end there is only One opinion that ultimately matters, and that we live life for an audience of One. Max Lucado wrote that Almighty God is the One who made us, and He does not make mistakes. We matter to Him. We are His handiwork, so He thinks we are pretty special.

It is true that constructive criticism may be in order sometimes, but it should come from those who love us and have our best interest at heart. I fear that oftentimes we live our lives basing our sense of self-worth and value on the opinions of others when, in fact, what matters is what God thinks. Everyone must realize that we matter to Him. We were created in His image so we are His image bearers. We matter so much to Him that He went to a lot of trouble to make sure we can spend eternity with Him. We live for an audience of One.

The second phrase my mother liked to say was, “Bloom where you are planted.” What she meant was, wherever life leads you, trust in God’s purpose for your being there. Growing up, I really did not like my high school or the university I attended for my undergraduate degree. When I complained about school or other things, my mother would say that phrase to me. In other words, embrace whatever God has for you and trust in His purpose. You are not where you are by accident, and wherever it is, glorify Him by how you embrace life rather than complaining and wishing you were do-
ing something else. What is in that place and the people whose lives you cross are not an accident.

I feel incredibly blessed by where I have been planted. My wife and I have a small but very nice home. We live in Southwest Florida, we have each other, and our son is close by. I have the joy of being a minister in a beautiful place with a wonderful congregation. Life is good! Certainly, this is a place in which one can bloom. But I also know it will not always be this way. The clock keeps ticking, and the day is coming when very possibly, should I live long enough, there will be hospital stays. Then the day may come when my wife or my son must come to me and say, “You can’t live by yourself anymore,” and they may need to take the car keys from me. I have already told my son that when that day comes, he should act without fear, and hopefully I will have the grace not to make it more difficult than it needs to be because he would be doing it because he loves me. I may be in an assisted living facility or a nursing home—who knows—but I can hear my dear mother’s voice: “Steven, embrace it and bloom where you are planted.”

Even in those places we would prefer not to be, how can we glorify God and bless those around us? The only way is by genuinely embracing the situation and trusting in the purpose of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps the most difficult part is putting His purpose above our own. We love to make plans and envision our lives being a certain way, but God has a different plan, and He puts things on our calendars without consulting us first. What peace, though, in knowing that we are His instruments and whenever He sends the call, we follow Him!

One of my mother’s most repeated phrases, which is the title of the sermon for today, was, “Well, bless your heart!” Now, I hear others say it, but when my mother said it there was a subtext. When she said, “Steven, bless your heart,” it was not a mere expression. She would look me straight in the eye, and I knew there was more to it than just her being nice, because the subtext was that she wanted to make sure I was analyzing and examining carefully what was in my
heart. How was my heart being blessed? She had a wonderful way of inspiring the examination of attitudes and desires, relationships and empathy for others, so when she said, “Bless your heart,” I could always hear her asking me, “Steven, what is in your heart?” For example, one day when I was 9 or 10 years old, we were riding in the car and stopped at a stop sign. I looked out the window and saw some men conversing. One of them was a burly guy with long hair, a mustache, and a gold tooth; he had chains and boots…the whole 9 yards. In an attempt to be funny, I blurted out, “Well, look at that beauty,” and everyone laughed—except my mother. Without any hint of judging me, her sweet voice came from the front seat and said, “Now Steven, somebody loves him.” That just laid me out. I felt so convicted and I thought, “What a heel. Why would I say that about this person? She’s right. He’s loved by somebody. He might be somebody’s brother, somebody’s husband, somebody’s son, somebody’s uncle, and I made a comment like that.” It was her sweet way of causing me to examine the question, “Are you heart healthy?” Not just physically, which is important, but spiritually. It was her way of discipling her family and regularly asking us, “Are you following Jesus?”

Jesus spoke much about the heart, but what do we mean by heart? The word “heart” has often been used figuratively; it does not only refer to the blood-pumping organ. It figuratively refers to the hidden springs of our personal life, our emotional life, our intellectual life, our moral life. It is the point of contact we have with God and with one another. It is the sphere of Divine influence, the center of our character and our personality where all the things come together in a place that we figuratively refer to as “the heart.” Many passages examine the coming together of all aspects of our life into what we call our heart. If our life includes noticeable anger, unforgiveness, judgmentalism, resentment or disgust, we need to ask ourselves, “What’s the source?” We have one place to look, it is in the heart! If we want our life to be different, to be full of kindness and empathy and gentleness, repentance, charity, encouragement, and so much more, there is only one place to transform.
Our Scripture reading is just a few verses from one of David’s psalms. This psalm is heart-wrenching. David is at his lowest spiritual point, coming before God on his knees, absolutely contrite for the totally wicked things he had done. He is pouring out his soul to Almighty God. Hear now Psalm 51:10-12 (ESV).

Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and renew a right spirit within me.  
11Cast me not away from your presence,  
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.  
12Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and uphold me with a willing spirit.

My friends, this is the goal, the earnest desire and prayer of every disciple of Jesus, “Create in me a clean heart…” so that Your Spirit will fill me and guide me and direct me and comfort me, that I will be Your instrument in the world. Notice that David says, “Restore to me the joy of your salvation…” so that his joy will be complete. That is the source of the joy; it comes from God. There are a lot of things that we enjoy, but that inextinguishable joy comes from Him.

Consider what Jesus said about the heart in Luke 6:45, “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.” It would not have come out of our mouths if it were not first in our hearts. The context of this passage is Jesus’ use of a metaphor of “good trees and bad trees, good fruit and bad fruit.” A good tree will not produce bad fruit, it will produce only good fruit; and a bad tree cannot produce good fruit, it can only produce bad fruit. It is the same with us. Sometimes people want to bring about change to their lives and they try to change the fruit, but working on the fruit is the wrong place to start. We must work on the **tree** that **produces** the fruit. Remember my mother’s response to my stupid statement about the poor fellow on the corner? She did not correct my words and say, “Oh, Steven, you shouldn’t say that.” No, she went deep, “Somebody loves him, don’t you?” We work too hard trying to change the stuff we do and say when we need heart surgery. That is where change comes and where it needs to start.
By contrast, Jesus says in John 7:38, “Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture says, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” When Christ is first in our life, when Jesus is the Lord of our life and our heart is full of Him and full of the power of the Holy Spirit, what naturally flows from us is that which is going to bless others.

Think how refreshing a cold mountain stream is and how the life-giving water goes out into the soil and into the roots of plants. He is saying that if your heart is full of the love of Jesus, it brings refreshment and life-giving blessings to all we encounter. This may sound good, but is it practical? Yes! My mother had a very practical way of approaching the Christian faith, as did Jesus.

What we so easily discount is how God uses every single one of us as an instrument in His hand. We may bless people in ways we do not even know. We may not be aware of how God uses us. It might be something as simple as engaging in conversation with someone and we happen to say something that is exactly the thing that person needed to hear at that moment, and we walk on never knowing. Almighty God is always working when our lives and our hearts are full of the Holy Spirit. As the verse says, it will flow as long as He is the source.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus exhorts us to get our priorities in order. We must be careful not to make idols out of things. We can even make idols out of blessings and good things by making them more important than they were intended to be. He teaches that we must be clear about our priorities in life. In Matthew 6:21 He said, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Here is the heart again. Whatever you consider your treasure to be will possess your heart. There are many things in our life that we consider our treasures: family members, spouse, children, whatever causes we work on or any number of other things. Whatever we think of as our treasure, whether it is our Mercedes, our bank account, or whatever it is will possess our heart. Jesus is asking that we consider Him as our highest treasure. When we put Jesus as our highest priority
and our greatest treasure, everything else falls into its proper place. We are able to love, to work in our cause, to parent, to focus on every endeavor in ways that we never imagined possible.

My wife Nanette and I talk about this frequently to remind ourselves of our priorities. She knows that she will always be second in my life, but that lifts her spirits to the skies because if her husband puts Jesus as the highest priority of his life, she knows what kind of husband she has. I know that Nanette will always put me second because she puts Jesus first, so I know what kind of wife I have. We are able to love each other in ways and to a depth and consistency that we could never do on our own energy and our own spirit, because Jesus is our treasure and when He is our treasure everything else flows from there.

There is something that could get in the way of all this. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8). As we go through different experiences and struggles in our lives, as we take on attitudes and judgments of all kinds, our ability to see the Hand of God at work may be clouded. We need a pure heart—just what David was praying for when he asked God to create a clean heart within him. We need to clear out all the junk and make space to attribute to God the work that we could not see before. We get so caught up in the struggles of this world that we oftentimes ask where God is in it all. That is a pretty clear indication that there is too much junk in the way to see Him.

The poem *Footprints in the Sand* provides a perfect illustration for us. A person sees two sets of footprints in the sand, denoting that Jesus is walking along in life beside him. But, at his saddest and most troubled time in life, he sees only one set of footprints and believes that Jesus has left him. Then he realizes that Jesus did not leave at all; when there is only one set of footprints, Jesus was carrying him. If one has a pure heart, one will recognize His work, will trust in Him and in His purpose. We will experience every kind of emotion in our lives, but when we fall, He will be there to catch us.
In this time in which we now live, our world seems to be turning upside down. In addition to the pandemic we see so much division and upheaval in our beloved country. It is easy to become discouraged and fearful and to ask, “Where is God?” John 14:1 says, “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God believe also in me.” It is easy for hearts to be troubled, but does our faith tell us that God is a God who is greater than any of these things? Does our faith tell us that in the midst of all the upheaval we can trust in His purpose; that He is working out His purpose in the midst of all this? Does it tell us that we are not alone? The Bible does!

What wisdom does the Church have to speak into all of the upheavals in our country and our world right now? What example do other people get from Christians in the midst of all this? When others encounter us do they encounter demonizing of other people, fear, despair? Or is there, not in a bragging or conceited way, a quiet confidence like my mother had, who trusted the Holy Spirit, that though we do not understand it all or like it all, in our hearts we know that there is a God who is greater than all? He will work out His purpose, and we need not fear. When we trust in what He is doing, we can be His instruments. We may not be exactly sure how to do that, but we must trust that He will show us. Do others see the Church panic? A lot of people are panicking. Why would one panic when one knows God, when one embraces the Lord of life who conquers all?

You might ask, “How do I build my faith to the point that I can have that measure of peace?” Jesus answers that question in Luke 18:1, “And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought to always pray and not lose heart.” One of the main ways to build up that faith is through prayer. What is prayer? Sometimes people think of prayer as a cause and effect—I pray for something and my prayer will make it happen. Actually, prayer is a spiritual discipline that has been given to us as a means to develop and nurture our relationship with Almighty God. We can talk to Him, we can listen to Him, we can abide with Him, and the more intimately we do that, the more we come to know Him, and our trust in Him skyrockets.
All too often we are like Peter. Remember the wonderful story in Matthew 14 about the disciples on the Sea of Galilee when a storm blew up? They were concerned because the storm was greater than they were. Their boat was filling with water, it was about ready to sink, and they were panicking. They looked out and saw Jesus walking across the water. At first, they were afraid, He was coming toward them, doing something that nobody thought anyone could do! Peter called out to Him asking if He really was Jesus, and if so, to call him out on the water as well. Peter then did something he never thought he could do. He got out of the boat and walked on water! Jesus had enabled him to do it. But then, Peter started observing the storm and how great it was, and he started to sink. Jesus grabbed his hand and pulled him into the boat, and asked him, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” (Matthew 14:31) Peter had seen Him stop a storm, but he allowed himself to be fearful that the challenge was greater than Jesus.

We fall into the fear that life in this fallen world will win out over the Lord of all. We think that the challenges that are thrown in our way are greater than the Creator of it all. We fear that the Holy Spirit is not strong enough to sustain us through whatever is ahead of us. This is where we must know more than just things about Jesus, we must know Him, and prayer is one of the best ways to do this. It does not mean that we will not experience all the emotions of life, but once we have an encounter with the Risen Christ there is no turning back. Once we have really encountered Him there is nothing in this life that should intimidate us. We can be concerned about things and things can make us uneasy, but we know that there is a God, a Risen Christ, who is greater than all things. Our hearts can soar above whatever this life dishes out. Jesus told His disciples when they were about to face the greatest disappointment of their lives, His crucifixion, “So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you” (John 16:22). Do you believe in that? Do you believe that when Jesus takes over your heart, nobody and no thing can take the joy from your heart?
You see, this amazing blessing of faith is that the joy we have is not dependent on the absence of trouble. The miracle of the Christian life is that there is joy even in the midst of trouble because it is dependent on faith and trust in the Lord who conquers all.

Now, given everything that I have outlined, and given all that Jesus said, this is when His Great Commandment makes the most sense. It is not just obligatory, but it becomes our greatest desire because of a heart transformed, and it is absolutely the best way to live.

“And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.”

Mark 12:30

Notice, this starts with the heart and the rest follows, and when it does, we will love others, and we will glorify God in ways that we never could before, and peace and joy will absolutely fill our lives. God be praised.