

Do you remember what you did to prepare for super storm Sandy? You bought extra food. You slept in the basement. You tested your generator. Maybe you nailed some things down. When danger is clear and present, it is easier to be on guard. But sometimes danger is silent like cancer. It sneaks up on us. How do we guard against that? Both kinds of danger have a bearing on the biblical text we talk about today. **Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.** (Proverbs 4:23)

### We Are Vulnerable

Your heart is **the wellspring of life**. It is the endless source of life. What does that mean? In the Bible your heart means what you love and what kind of person you are becoming because of what you love. The power to love, which God hard-wired into your very being, is the endless source of life worth living. Why guard it?

The Bible says to **guard your heart**, because your power to love is vulnerable to danger. To **guard your heart** means to protect yourself from loving anything that will make you into the wrong kind of person. Does anyone remember Debbie Boone's love song from 1977, "You Light Up My Life?" It justified the love she sang about in two short lines: "It can't be wrong when it feels so right." We'll never know how many people have been damaged, because their choices felt so right, especially in relationships. How can it feel so right to love what is wrong?

The answer takes us back to three biblical quotations that I used in the first sermon in this series. Here's the first one: **"The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve."** (Jeremiah 17:9-10)

The next one comes from Isaiah 29:13: **"These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me."** After quoting that passage from Isaiah, Jesus went on to draw this conclusion: **"What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean.' For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly."** (Mark 7:20-22)

Something has so corrupted our power to love that we can and do at times love what is not best for us. We can even put on a religious show, when there is no love in us for the Lord we profess. And out of our disordered love come behaviors that wreak havoc everyday in people's lives and in the lives of nations, and many of them started, because they just felt right. Disordered love is a silent destroyer.

The three biblical quotations, which we just heard from three Hebrew prophets, the greatest of whom is Jesus, are part of the gospel, the good news. It is hard news, because it tells the truth about people. It is good news, because Jesus Christ did not stand aloof from our disordered love and its consequences. He walked into it with His eyes wide open and shone a light on it and made a promise to set us free from it; and as the Gospel of John puts it: **The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.** (John 1:5)

Before proceeding, could I pray for us in light of what we just talked about? "Holy Father, you sent Jesus into the world to destroy the works of the devil and make us your children and heirs of eternal life. Thank you for giving us this hope. May this hope

help us to purify ourselves as Christ is pure, so that when He comes again with power and great glory, we may be made like Him in his eternal and glorious kingdom. Amen.”

### What Do We Guard Against?

**Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.** What do we guard against? I want to talk about three dangers Christians today face.

The first is the sexual revolution. Its message goes like this: “All sexual choices are legitimate. We’re to enjoy sexual freedom, and the only limit we should place on sexual relations is consent.” (*First Things*, “The Public Square,” R.R. Reno, February 2015, e-magazine) This message pervades every medium of mass communication. No one questions it. No one satirizes it. No one talks about the growing social damage this deception causes. No one acknowledges that women and the poor are more at risk and are being damaged at least as much or more than they ever were before the feminist revolution.

Guard against disordered sexual love. The Christian faith offers a better alternative: **Flee from sexual immorality ... Honor God with your body.** (1 Corinthians 6:18, 20) Think about that: **Honor God with your body.** When you make your sexual choices, say, “Lord, I do this to honor you by the most intimate use of my body.”

The second danger is drifting away from the Lord. The Apostle Paul in 2 Timothy 4:9 made a passing comment to his young protégé, Timothy, about a mutual friend named Demas. **Do your best to come to me quickly, for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica.** “O Demas! What bewitched you and turned you from the central fire of Christ’s mission in the world for “the bonfire of the vanities” that is **this world?**”

College English professors insisted that my generation read books like George Orwell’s *1984* and *Animal Farm* and Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon*. Both men wrote memorably about political tyranny. They “feared those who would ban books” and “those who would deprive us of information.” They “feared the truth would be concealed from us.” (Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, vii)

Those same college English professors wanted us to read Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*. Huxley presented an equally frightening but very different vision of what would crush the human spirit. “What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book ... Huxley feared those who would give us so much information that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism ... the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance.” (Ibid)

“In short, Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us.” (Ibid, viii) You and I are faced with the very real possibility that Huxley was right, and we can drift away from our Lord and His Church on the delightful narcotic of endless distractions. It’s easy to drift away. We love distractions.

Guard against distracted love. The Christian faith offers a better alternative: **“Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”** (Matthew 6:33) Think about that! Get your God priorities right, and the endless distractions we face will loosen their grip on you. When social media, and juggling home and work, and irritability and fatigue get you down, it’s a warning that your priorities are in disarray. It’s time to say, “Lord, I’ve lost my way again. Restore my love for you. Bring order back into my life.”

A third danger we have to guard against is despair of pursuing the truth. Several years ago, a public school teacher told me about a seminar, which the Brandywine School District sponsored. They brought in a high-powered academic from Stanford University to guide the seminar. What prompted the seminar was the persistent discrepancy in test scores between black students and other students in the district.

The public school teacher who told me about this was present, when someone asked the Stanford University scholar if they could talk about the home situations students came from and their impact on how students learn. That learned man responded by saying, “We are not going to talk about that.”

Why would we not talk about it? Is the problem going away because we don’t talk about it? No. Is it hard to talk about? Yes. Do we not have capable educators and concerned citizens of all races, who would be willing to tackle this issue? I believe we do. But we don’t talk. And this is just one public issue we don’t talk about. We can’t talk about them. The powers that be don’t allow them to be discussed in the public conversation.

Behind their unwillingness is despair. Too many people have given up the pursuit of truth. They prefer to “go along to get along.” They are pragmatic. They may think “truth” is an idea used by the powerful to control other people. The despair shows itself, when people stop a difficult conversation with the hellish little words, “Well, whatever!”

Guard against this despair of pursuing the truth. The Christian faith offers a better alternative. Jesus said: “**You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.**” (John 8:32) Of all people Christians should not fear the truth, wherever it may be found; and we should never tire of pursuing the truth, wherever it may be hidden.

The sexual revolution, the distractions that cause us to drift away from God, and the despair of pursuing the truth can capture your love and betray you into life choices that do great harm. So, how do we guard our hearts against these and other silent and not so silent dangers?

### **Guarding Our Hearts**

There are steps we can take to guard it. I will talk about two. The first is this: make the Church your spiritual home. Guarding your heart is a team effort. The forces hostile to the Christian faith and to a Christian view of life have grown strong and bold. You don’t stand a chance against them by yourself.

The spiritual leaders of the first Christian congregations said things like this to each other: **Encourage one another.** (Hebrews 10:25) **Pray for each other.** (James 5:16) **Instruct one another.** (Romans 15:14) **Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.** (Ephesians 5:19) **Teach...[one another].** (Colossians 3:16) **Admonish one another.** (Colossians 3:16) **Build each other up.** (1 Thessalonians 5:11)

The first Christians knew they were oddballs. The world had never seen anything like them. Some of their friends and neighbors actually called them atheists, because they no longer worshiped the gods their ancestors had worshiped for centuries. They knew they had to stick together or perish. So do we.

No individual Christian can maintain by himself the vigilance necessary to guard his heart against the encroaching darkness of our secular world, which “advances progressively backwards” with great power and charm. We need each other’s eyes to help us spot anything that could manipulate our love and turn us away from the Lord. I will

elaborate on the mutual help we give each other next Sunday. For today it is enough to say: Make the Church your spiritual home. Make BVBC your spiritual home.

Second, remind yourself, and let's remind each other that the Lord Himself guards our hearts in ways we don't know. We know that Judas betrayed Jesus and that Peter denied Him three times. There is a back-story to Peter's denial that we are not so familiar with. Only the Gospel of Luke tells the story in Luke 22. Jesus has just instituted what His followers came to call the Last Supper.

Jesus made this strong statement about His disciples. Verses 29-30: **"You are those who have stood by me in my trials. And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."** The disciples had to be feeling pretty good.

The next words out of Jesus' mouth in verse 31 seem to contradict that strong statement. He said it directly to the natural leader of the disciples, Simon Peter. Listen to this: **"Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat."** "Simon, the devil would like to take you and shake you until there is nothing left of you but the withered stalk of a wrung out man."

Now, Jesus again in verse 32: **"But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."** **Keep me**, prayed the Psalmist, **as the apple of your eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings from the wicked who assail me, from my mortal enemies who surround me.** (Psalm 17:8)

And He does, and most of the time we don't know it. We don't have to know. We just need to remember: the devil didn't sift Peter like wheat, but he shook him almost to despair; he had to be turned back to Christ. We are just as vulnerable, but the Lord Himself guards our hearts even in our most vulnerable moments.

### Take Away

It is the nature of sin to corrupt all things human. We see it in addiction, violence, poverty, and abortion. But sin also corrupts institutions: government, media, Church, education, and marriage. I hear people talk about overcoming cruelty, violence, and poverty as if it were just a matter of having enough money, brains, and manpower. They don't know the nature of evil. It will crush your idealism like a bug.

Now the good news! We can resist sin. We can't eradicate it, but we can resist it. Listen to the Apostle Paul's stirring call to spiritual warfare in Ephesians 6:10-11: **Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.** The decisive battle against evil has already been fought and won on Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

Don't let sin make your love grow cold. **Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.** Our Lord is renovating the whole house of God. He will protect us, and we can help each other.