Well, it happened again. I was over at the dentist with my sister and he says—this is the second time he’s said it—“I can’t believe it,” he says. “You and your sister look so much alike. You are the male and female versions of one another!” If I want to hear hard truths I go to my wife; not my dentist. Joe Montana—he’s the same age I am. Mel Gibson—he’s my age. Tom Cruise-- born in Louisville like me--just six years younger. Why can’t I look like one of them? But my sister? Who wants to look like their sister? Let me ask, how many of you have ever played poker? Let’s see your hands. It looks like we’ve got some gamblers and sinners here (but we Lutherans don’t consider card-playing a sin). Now, when you play a hand of stud poker you have to play the cards you’re dealt. You aren’t allowed to pass your cards to anybody else or exchange the hand you were dealt for something better. You have to play the hand you’re dealt. And, in many ways, that’s a metaphor of life. Life is like a hand of poker. And the Bible tells us something about the cards we are holding in our hand. The first thing the Bible tells us that every card we hold in our hands is marred by sin. In his letter to the Romans Paul writes, “No one is perfect; no not one.” (Romans 3:10) We know this to be true. Nothing in this world, nothing in this life, nothing on this planet is perfect. If you’re looking for perfection you’re looking for heaven on earth and you’re going to be sorely disappointed. Because nothing on this earth is perfect. The second thing the Bible tells us is that you and I, we have a Savior from sin. His name is Jesus Christ God’s Son. And even though we can’t exchange the cards that we’ve been dealt, God sent His Son to transform our lives—to transform our loosing hand into a winning hand. This is the good news of the Gospel and this is what we’re going to talk about today.

So, bear with me and let’s keep using this metaphor of five cards
in a poker hand. If you want to understand who you really are you have to understand the five cards that you’ve been dealt. So here they are …

THE FIRST CARD IS MY CHEMISTRY. That’s my DNA—what’s been handed down to me by my parents and grandparents. It’s what makes me and my sister look so much alike. I was having lunch with one of our members last week and he told me that the gift he had given himself last Christmas was to sign up on Ancestry.com to get a DNA test. They send you a test kit in the mail. You spit into a test tube. You add some preservative. Send it back. And in 6-8 weeks they give you a report—your ethnic background—where in the world you come from—and how many of your 1st, 2nd, and 3rd cousins they have identified in their database. All for $99. Amazing! So we’ve all been dealt this DNA card and none of us are perfect. Some of us have bad eyesight or a tendency to be overweight or maybe you have a crooked nose. And (I want you to write this down)—no physical flaw is sinful or shameful. In your physical body, in your DNA, God made you just the way he wanted you to be. In 2 Corinthians St. Paul talks about a flaw that he had in his DNA. He calls it a “thorn in the flesh.” We know it was some kind of physical or speech defect, maybe stuttering. But God used Paul in spite of it. Maybe folks listened a little closer to the message of the Gospel because of it. The point is that God made us who we are. The first card he’s given us is our DNA card.

THE SECOND CARD IS MY CONNECTIONS. Life is about connections—our relationships. There is a story about a guy who comes up to Jesus and asks, “Lord, what’s life all about?” And Jesus answers, “Life is about love. It’s not about accomplishments or success or the acquisition of stuff. Life is about love. First,” Jesus says, “love God with your whole heart, soul and mind. Second, “Jesus says, “love your neighbor as yourself.” Life is about love.

VIDEO: “Choose Love” by Hyper Pixels Media

Life is about relationships. And the thing about sin is that sin disconnects us from our relationships. Sin disconnects us from the relationships we have with each other and sin disconnects us from our relationship with God. Which is why we need a Sav-
ior—to get us connected back up again in our relationship with God and in our relationships with one another. Have you ever wondered why Jesus tells us in the Lord’s Prayer, “When you pray, pray this way—say, “forgive us our sins (forgive us our trespasses) as we forgive those who trespass against us.” It’s about love. It’s about relationships. We need this in our lives.

THE THIRD CARD THAT MAKES ME WHAT I AM IS MY CIRCUMSTANCES. These are the things that happen to you and happen around you and shape your identity. Did you grow up in a wonderful family? That’s good. That’s great. I’m glad for you. That shapes your identity. Were you ever abused? If, you have been, I’m sorry. That too, shapes our identity. If you’ve ever had a failure or a series of failures, or a crisis or tragedy or a catastrophe in your life, they all shape who you are—in a good way or in a bad way. What I mean is that the circumstances of your life can drive you away from God or they can drive you closer to God. Do you remember what Paul says at the end of Romans 8?—“For we know,” Paul says, “WE KNOW that God can use all things for good for those that love God and are called according to his purpose.” This is part of the good news and the transforming power of the Gospel—whatever happens in your life—whatever may look bad or terrible or tragic in the moment. God can use it—God can use ALL things for our good.

THE FOURTH CARD THAT MAKES ME WHAT I AM IS MY CONSCIOUS. This is the still, small voice in my head. It’s how I talk to myself. Paul says that the Law of God is written on our hearts. But I know that my conscious can be and has been influenced and corrupted by the world. Because of this, I can no longer always see things clearly. That’s why Paul says in Romans 12:2 “Don’t copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God’s will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.” As Christians we are challenged to be different—to live a different kind of life and to think, react and respond in a different kind of way from the people in the world around us.

THE FIFTH CARD THAT MAKES ME ME IS MY CHOICES. The Bible says that you were created in the image of God. What does that mean? One thing that means is that when God creat-
ed our first parents at the beginning of time—he created us perfect. Without sin and without flaw. Another thing it means is that you and I have free will—we have the ability to make a moral choice. Dogs can’t make a moral choice. Cats can’t, elephants can’t, coyotes can’t. Only human beings have the ability to make a free moral choice. And this is a great blessing, but it is also a curse—because you and I can choose to do either right or wrong. But here’s the good news—this fifth card, this choice card can change everything else in my hand. I can’t change my DNA, but I can choose to live healthier. I can’t change my relationships, but I can choose how I respond to them and I can choose new relationships. I can’t choose my circumstances, but I can certainly choose how I react to what happens to me. I can’t change my conscience or the values instilled in me by others—some good, some maybe not so good—but I can allow the Spirit of Christ to transform my heart and my mind so that I can begin to see things a little more clearly from God’s point of view.

But here’s the best news—even if you’ve made the wrong choices in your life, even if you’ve made those wrong choices over and over again—you still have a Savior named Jesus. He still loves you. He died for you. He died to forgive you and to save you from your sins, but more than that he wants to be your Savior every day. And, do you know something?—that changes everything. Because when I allow Jesus to be my Savior every day, he empowers me to make the right choices and to follow through on those choices and to transform what might have been a losing hand into a winning hand. You may be thinking, “But it’s too late to change.” No it’s not! It’s never too late. God is waiting for the opportunity. Open your heart to him. He wants to change you.