

Hardened Hearts

As noted last week, we have arrived at the beginning of Lent. You may notice that, although the traditional purple décor is in place, the table with the crown of thorns and the purple candles is not evident this year. I decided to postpone and consolidate what has become traditional in our time together by reserving the extinguishing of the candles to Passion Sunday, mostly just to do something a bit different. And as I begin a series of sermons that also traditionally call for self-reflection on the fallen nature of our society and our own participation in that fallenness, I want to be very sure that my purpose in what can be difficult messages to hear is apparent. As I look out at your faces on Sunday mornings, I know that I am seeing a group of people who take their faith in God through Christ Jesus very seriously. I know that you all are committed to living in the Jesus way and to doing what you can to help your neighbors, however you encounter them. So I feel no need to preach to convict you of sins – I hope, instead, to preach to encourage you and to give you insights that can help you fulfill your instinct for service. None of us are perfect but one of the ways to work on our own imperfections is to lovingly help others to deal with their troubles. When I titled this sermon “Hardened Hearts,” it was not your hearts I had in mind. If I do my job well this morning, then at the end of our time together you will have heard some things that will help you apply that balm of Gilead to hearts that you encounter in the weeks and months to come.

There are certainly some hardened hearts revealed in this well-known story from John’s Gospel this morning. Unlike most of the passages in Matthew Timothy Slemmons’ proposed “Year D” lectionary schedule, this passage actually occurs in the Revised Common Lectionary, although only the first half, verses 1-9, are listed for the sixth Sunday in Easter for Year C. I want to begin, though, with a look at some hard hearted behavior that crops up in that second half of the passage. In verse 10, the newly healed man is confronted, as John writes, by “the Jews.” What does he mean? Clearly, he’s not speaking of the entire nation warning this man about his transgression but rather about a specific group. Given the location of the story, near the Temple, it is likely that these are either religious leaders or devout persons on their way to the Temple. Given their focus on the Law, it’s quite possible that these are Pharisees, a favorite foil for the other Gospel writers. But we can’t be sure.

What we can be sure of is that these particular individuals have hardened hearts. The former invalid tells them he has just been made well but they do not ask him about that, celebrate with him and praise God for his deliverance. They just want to know who is the cause for the offense. Later, when they discover that Jesus is the one who said, “Pick up your mat and walk,” they begin to persecute him, first for his Sabbath-breaking and then for his claiming of God as his Father. If you’ll think back two weeks, you’ll remember what happens to Sabbath-breakers and blasphemers according to the law these men are keen to uphold. They are taken outside the gates and killed. Far from being grateful to and curious about the healer of this newly-restored man, these hard-hearted folk only want to crush what doesn’t fit into their carefully worked out category of holiness.

There are some things here to note. First, it is good to remember that zeal for the Law or for the Gospel is not in itself a bad thing. In fact, it is a good thing. It’s good to be excited about the religious truths that we have discovered. It’s good to want to share them with others. It is not good to let our own understandings of the truth lead us to actions that are unloving or destructive of others. Those of you who saw the film, The Women’s Balcony, either with us last Saturday

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night or some other time, have seen a good example of this. The young Rabbi David is motivated by what he understands as proper obedience to God. This leads him to join in a group for prayer, to help with the renovation of a synagogue, and other admirable deeds. But it also leads him to put his own understanding of righteousness ahead of the understanding of others and their need for community. He goes off the rails, even committing a crime to further his cause, because he forgets that the ends never justify the means and that the God of Abraham is a loving God. I'd say he also forgets that the God of Abraham is also the God of Sarah, but that's another sermon. In trying so hard to do the right thing, he lets his heart be hardened against the very people he is trying to help.

Here's another point for us to consider out of this part of our story: because the author of this Gospel was not careful to differentiate among groups when writing about Jewish opponents of Jesus, his words have been interpreted over the centuries to mean that all Jewish people were opposed to Christ, that all of them had a part in killing their own Messiah, and that all of them were, therefore, irredeemable. This horrible, a-contextual, perverted reading of the Fourth Gospel has caused untold misery and bloodshed over the centuries, including the Holocaust, and has caused many sensitive Christians to consider the Gospel According to John to be unworthy of study. Clearly, I disagree. I blame not the carelessness of the writer, although it troubles me, but the hard-heartedness of too many readers and, especially, preachers. By not paying attention to the whole message of this tender book, they have repeated the sin of those who persecuted Jesus for not meeting their expectations of what righteousness looked like.

Friends, we live in the world where these sorts of things happen, where well-meaning people of all stripes become convinced that their way and only their way is the way to happiness, holiness, and virtue. We must be very careful that we do not fall into the same trap. The way we do things at Good Shepherd Church is a way that makes sense to us and fulfills us but it is not the only way to be authentic, loving Baptists. The Baptist way is our way but it is not the only way to be Christian. We are committed followers of Christ Jesus but that is not the only way to be authentically, lovingly human. Our religious and political convictions are an important part of who we are and we are right to be convicted and committed but we must not let them be a barrier to loving all of God's children, whoever and wherever they are.

There are some other lessons about hard-heartedness in the earlier part of this story as well. Over the years, I've read more than a few articles and heard a sermon or two about the unworthiness of the man healed by Jesus at Beth-Zatha. "Why had he been there for 38 years?" they ask. "Didn't he want to get well? Did he have too sweet a deal lying there? Why wasn't he more grateful? He didn't even ask Jesus' name!" And so on. The overall thrust seems to be how gracious Jesus was to heal the guy at all and, by extension, how we mere humans shouldn't have to be so nice to such a miscreant. These folks tend to read Jesus' question, "Do you want to be made well?" more as an accusation. "Do you *want* to be made well?"

It's a pretty classic case of blaming the victim, something that, in my opinion, takes a heart of stone. Again, we see it all the time in our society, particularly, alas, in cases of rape. "Were you dressed provocatively? Did you say anything to lead him on? What were you doing there at that time anyway?" This particular case is more insidious. Those of us who haven't lived with a life-altering condition for years may find it easy to forget or simply may not know the sense of

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hopelessness and resignation it can bring. That, in turn, can lead to a kind of dullness of spirit or to an oversensitivity to perceived insult or a plethora of other dysfunctions.

These sorts of reactions are not confined to those with chronic medical issues. Last year, I heard a speech from Dr. Joy DeGruy and I recently read her groundbreaking book, Post Traumatic Slave Disorder. Dr. DeGruy very convincingly shows how African-American culture has been crippled by a generational transmission of the traumas resulting from slavery and the subsequent impositions of “Black Codes,” Jim Crow laws, and the new Jim Crow of mass incarceration on our nation’s Black citizens. Among the symptoms of PTSS: “Vacant Esteem... Marked Propensity for Anger and Violence... (and) Internalized Racism.” Fortunately, Dr. DeGruy also proposes some very common sense, loving steps that can be taken in Black families as well as in society as a whole to combat this pernicious syndrome. This is an important work to share in a society seemingly bent on misunderstanding a positive statement like “Black Lives Matter” and which continues to blame the victims of our country’s original sin of racism and slavery for the other-imposed difficulty they have had in healing.

As I remarked on Facebook earlier this week, I have also had my fill of victim-blaming when it comes to those experiencing homelessness. Yes, it is true that many folks who are homeless have made bad decisions that have contributed to their plight. Is there anyone here who has never made a bad decision? Our society has slowly come to show more understanding and compassion to those who are addicted to alcohol but I’m not hearing a lot of compassion for those who’ve become addicted to opiates, often due to questionable decisions made by a doctor. And anyone who suggests, “Well, homeless people just prefer to live outside,” is staggeringly hard-hearted.

For those who may not have seen his response to me on Facebook, I want to share with you the words of our old friend, Matthew Forsythe, who was the superintendent for Walsh Construction on the Shepherd’s Garden project. He wrote: “this reminds me of something that I experienced back in 2012, when we completed construction of Gossett Place in the U-district... it was my second project after Shepherds Garden... housing units for homeless youth and veterans. I watched as homeless folks were given a unit of their own to live in and call home, and many of them openly wept upon being handed the keys. (These were) people who didn’t know what it felt like to sleep under a roof or in a bed for as long as they could remember. One by one, I watched as groups of them, within 48 hours, started abandoning their apartments in favor of sleeping on the sidewalk across the street, or right on a neighbor’s porch, or down the block somewhere. During the Grand Opening, one of the homeless couples described their own experience with it, and the overwhelming sense of experiencing such a drastic change to a lifestyle they had come to know for so long, that it was simply too much for them to adapt to. At least for a while, some of them made it their routine to use their unit only for cooking and showering, but would sleep outside at night and during the afternoon as well. Others, I’m told, couldn’t get comfortable with living in an apartment, and chose to return to the streets altogether, abandoning an apartment that they had been on a list for over a year to acquire. Mental illness was a major factor for a lot of these folks, drug and alcohol abuse for others. And for others still, neither applied. I definitely wouldn’t ever suggest that any of these folks didn’t want to live indoors. But for many, I have witnessed that living on the streets is seemingly all that they know, and where they are most accustomed to being, for any number of reasons and circumstances. Homelessness is a deep,

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tragic, convoluted, and often misunderstood dilemma in this country, and around the world, unfortunately.” I would add to Matt’s story that I have heard recently from two friends, each on the street for over 20 years and recently housed, who told me how odd it was to have a place to call home and how it had meant changes for them they had not expected. We must be very, very careful before we start assigning blame or even motives to victims of tragic circumstances.

But perhaps the most staggering example of hard-heartedness revealed in this healing story is not seen directly but shown in the heartbreaking words of the invalid. When Jesus asks him, “Do you want to be made well?” he replies, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.” “Sir, I have no one...” We have to ask, what’s become of his family, his friends, his neighbors? Yes, after 38 years, they may all be dead, but was there no one to take pity on this poor fellow? “Sir, I have no one...”

It is a terrible thing to be alone, in the United States in the 21st century just as much as in Judea in the first. I spent some time this past week with David Blackwell. Some of you know David and have helped me help him over the years with money or household items or in other ways. He’s been homeless for most of the time I’ve known him and for a while before that. You’ve likely not seen much of him for the last couple of years as he’s been bouncing back and forth between our area and a couple of places in California. You see, he’s trying to find a combination of federal and state and local government help that will get him the medical treatment he needs, a home, and enough money each month to buy his medications and food he can eat, doubly hard because of some of his medical problems. He’s not been able to put together that livable situation and I’m not sure he can. I don’t think that it’s possible, right now, to live solely on Social Security disability payments unless you have preexisting assets or unless you have someone to help you share expenses – a spouse or a family member or a friend. Like the man at Beth-Zatha, David has no one. Unless something changes for him, which would take a near miracle, I expect him to join George Parent and Brett Heald and Barry “Chief” Dunlop and Rob Stafford and Scotty Frost on the sad list of those I’ve known who died on the street. Our very society, the system of safety nets that was supposed to prevent cases like this, has failed because we as a nation have grown too hard-hearted.

I wonder, too, about Nikolas Cruz, the young man who committed those terrible murders in Florida this week. Did he, too, feel he had no one? Adopted at a young age, both his adoptive parents had died and he was living with the family of a friend. He told them on Wednesday that he wouldn’t go to school on Valentine’s Day. Did he feel excluded? Neighbors have said they thought he was bullied at school. We’ll probably never know what brought that kid to the point that he thought shooting up his school was his best plan. But we have to ask ourselves, what was his life like? What help did he need that his adoptive parents couldn’t or didn’t know how to access? What if there had been a caring mental health professional in his life? What if our society wasn’t so obsessed with guns? What might Nikolas Cruz have been if he had “had someone?” I grieve for this lost boy every bit as much as I grieve for his victims because it is the will of our Father that not one of these little ones be lost.

But because of the will of our Father, I am convinced that there is hope for each one of us and hope for our world. I also had a conversation this week with a friend whose unhardened heart is

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for the lonely. He's musing on ways of organizing a system to put those with no family or close friends in touch with a "buddy" – someone who will be alert if they don't check in for a couple of days, someone who will care for their pets or clean out their fridge if they are hospitalized unexpectedly. I'm not going to say more because my friend is in the early days of working on this idea but it was a huge boost to me this week to be reminded that we have brothers and sisters who are concerned about those who have no one, neighbors whose hearts are still soft, friends who look for ways to serve those in need.

We need to watch ourselves for traces of hard-heartedness or misplaced zeal but you know that. We need to look out for those who have no one but you know that, too. I know you do because I hear your stories about the way in which you help neighbors and family members and friends and I see the ways in which you love one another. We need to guard against feelings of helplessness, particularly in a week like this one when the world seems to have run amok and too much seems beyond our control. But we have a God of grace and glory who assures us that all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well. We must hold on to the promises of God, claim God's power, and be ready to speak out and to act in the face of hard-heartedness and evil for our God will bring salvation to this world, to God's beautiful and good creation. For this, let us pray and for this let us commit ourselves anew on this first Sunday of Lent and in all the days to come until, like Jesus, we experience the resurrection. Thanks be to God. Amen.