

NHPC, Overland, MO—6/3/18

TEXTS: II Corinthians 4_4-12
Mark 2: 23—3: 6

“Does God Grieve Our Hardened Hearts?”

What kind of heart do you have? Strong or weak? Broken or whole? Hard or soft?

Needless to say, when considering our hearts, we need to make a distinction between our physical hearts here in our chest and our emotional hearts, the sources of our feelings and convictions. Modern science tells us that emotions and feelings come from the brain—up here.

Nonetheless, scientists have never put their finger on the mystery of emotion and conviction. Maybe they are the result of chemical reactions in our brain, but surely there is something else that guides our thoughts and feeling.

Throughout human history, this “something else” has been our hearts. Our gospel lesson today talk about our “hardened hearts.”

To say that our hearts are “hardened” suggests that our hearts were once soft, but something has made them hard. Maybe someone had had a rough and tumble life. It might be in their genes, or maybe they had bad parents. Or, maybe it is just plain sin,

In any case, Jesus “grieves” the hardened hearts of the religious leaders of the temple when they criticize him for healing a man with withered hand, on the Sabbath. In the previous section of the

reading, the Pharisees has also criticized Jesus and his disciples when they plucked corn from a field on the Sabbath because they were hungry.

In both incidents, Jesus was condemned for working on the Sabbath in order to meet human need. In one case, it was the hunger of his disciples. In the other case, it was the healing of an injured man.

Were the religious leaders really interested in proper observance of the Sabbath laws? Maybe, but it seems they were more interested in harassing Jesus.

Apparently, they followed Jesus to the temple and watched to see if he would break another Sabbath law while in the temple. Jesus obliged when he healed the man with the withered hand.

Jesus knew what he was doing; he was revealing their hardened hearts. He asked them, ***“Is it lawful to do good or do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or kill?”***
(Mark 3: 4.)

They said nothing; they were silent.

They looked silly, not being able to say that helping people was more important than the Sabbath. The gospel writer Mark reports that Jesus ***“was grieved at the hardening of their hearts.”***
(Mark 3: 5)

Then he healed the man with the withered hand and the religious leaders went out to ***“conspire”*** --today we say collude—with the secular authorities about how to ***“destroy”*** him.

I think this reveals that their true intentions were not to honor the Sabbath. Rather, they wanted to kill Jesus because he was a threat to their religious and political power.

Let's go back to the episode in the field of grain. Jesus rebukes his critics recalling an Old Testament incident when David and some of his friends were hungry and ate the bread of the Presence in the temple.

This was a violation of ritual and Sabbath law. Nonetheless, it set a precedent that meeting human need was more important than following ritual rules.

Jesus pointed out that the Sabbath rules were given to meet human need, in this case a regular opportunity to worship God and rest from a week of labor. The Sabbath was not mandated by God for humans to follow no matter what. If there is a greater human need, it should have precedence.

This is important for us to remember on this day when we are celebrating the Lord's Supper.

We are following a mandate from Jesus that we should observe this ritual, yet the precedent of David applies: if there is human need we should meet it first. This does not mean that we should stop observing religious rituals, but rather affirm that meeting human needs is just as important.

Indeed, I would say that communion loses its significance unless it celebrated with a commitment to go out from here to serve all human needs. As I was considering what to say in this sermon during the past week, it was hard to resist the observation that many in our society right now have hard hearts.

They are willing to follow the law, or their interpretation of it, at the expense of meeting human needs, especially when mothers and children are fleeing violence and oppression.

As I was listened to rationalizations for separating children from their mothers—only at our southern border by the way--, I decided that their hearts are as hard as steel. Their argument is that it is illegal to bring undocumented children across the border. If a mother with a child comes here, she is “smuggling” children, declared a criminal, and her child is taken from her.

When she is released from jail and promised that her child will be returned, the child is either missing— the location of about 1,500 such children is unknown— or too far, far away to make a reunion possible. One son has been taken from his mother in Texas, then sent to Chicago.

Maybe all this is by the books, but it is also a violation of human decency. It is also cruel and evil.

It is also a violation of one of the most important commandments of the Bible that we are to welcome the widow, the

children, and foreigner into our midst. Many of the people who are enforcing these harsh laws are Christians. They either have not read their Bibles or have decided to openly defy God's law.

Why do people— even professed Christians— have such hard hearts? Hard to say for sure. Nature or nurture? Tempted by the devil to be cruel to fellow human beings? Maybe it's just plain sin, especially greed.

There is an antidote to hard hearts. In our Epistle Lesson from II Corinthians, we read that God shines light into our hearts when there is darkness.

Now is surely a dark time when there are many people with hard hearts. But God shows us the way by revealing the glory of God in the face of Jesus. When we are willing to look to Jesus to be our guide, the hardness of our hearts will be overcome.

Let the light of Jesus shine on you hearts so that we can make helping people in need our greatest priority.

Let us pray.

"Now to the One who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus, to all generations for ever and ever."

AMEN.