

Wednesday, October 16, 2019

May I speak to you in the name of our Triune God.

I have an Old Testament interpretation Midterm on Monday. Setting aside the fact that the last time I took a midterm the year *began* with the number 19, rather than ending` with it, I've been trying to squeeze in my reading wherever I can, and so I found myself driving up I84 listening to Exodus as an audiobook. Struck by how often Pharaoh's heart was "hardened," I looked, and it was 18 times, far more times than anyone else's heart in all the Bible.

Paul speaks today not of Pharaoh, but to the Church in Rome, and by extension, to us as church: "by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself." Now Paul, as I understand it, *probably* knew the Old Testament rather better than I do, *probably* knew each of these 18 times. He brings us back to this image. When are we like Pharaoh? Where are our hearts hard?

When my heart is hardened, I feel it on my face first, eyes narrowed, jaw set. It's... not a good face. And it means, reliably, that something has gone awry in my heart. I have started working to notice and to fight it, and you know what? It is, if you'll pardon the expression, HARD not to be hard. So, when Paul says, "you have no excuse," that is some tough love, because I can come up with a million excuses! "*Sure, my heart is hard, but she was mean! But he was wrong! But that's unfair!*" And there it is: a litany of excuses... and each one an attempt to hide—to hide my own hardness of heart under a guise of right and fairness. And right and fair are fine things, but that's not what Paul is going after here. My hardness of heart is not a fine thing. This *guise* is not a fine thing. Closing down my empathy and feeling for other people, *even people who have wronged me*, is not a fine thing. (Practically speaking, I also suspect it's not helpful, because who can judge righteously and fairly who is closed off from empathy?)

Hardening the heart, also, is a form of self protection. When I am angry-judging, usually, I can trace the thread of that feeling back to hurt, to pain, to the actual softness of my heart. And, by the way, usually I'm judging myself for that! I've got excuses there too! "*Don't let it get to you. No one can hurt you unless you let them. You're stronger than that.*" But the truth of the matter is that when I follow back that thread, to my own pain and harden my heart so as not to feel the pain, I will use that hardness to hurt back—and that is vengeance, not justice.

But, my excuse-addled brain will retort, *doesn't it amount to the same thing? If someone has, for example, done wrong and I sue them, and they have to pay a restitution, what does it matter if I have hardened my*

heart against them or not? If the resolution is just, why do I have to bother keeping my heart all warm and squishy? Because that is a lot of emotional work! And anyway, I'm in the right, so I shouldn't have to!

And this is where I *must* turn to face the reality that we are being held to a higher standard. Paul writes that God “will repay according to each one’s deeds” and while we’re used to thinking of “deeds” as being separate from, perhaps even opposite to, the state and condition of our hearts, when we harden our hearts, that too is a deed. Even when it looks like we’re doing the right thing. Maybe especially when it looks like you’re doing the right thing.

Speaking to the Pharisees, Jesus knows that they are given “seat of honor” and “greeted with respect.” They think of themselves as good people. And they probably did a lot of good deeds! But he tells them: “you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without realizing it.” An unmarked grave looks fine. Like... grass. A field. Could be a lovely meadow. Might look like a fine place for a picnic. But the book Numbers tells us that contact with a grave leaves a person ritually unclean for seven days. So, coming in contact with an unmarked grave, not realizing it, means that someone is now walking around, ritually unclean, and potentially doing things that are not appropriate for the ritually unclean to do. If a Pharisee is an unmarked grave, lovely wildflowers on the outside, putrefying flesh on the inside, they are not only rotten in their cores, but the corrupt what they contact. Even when they are tithing mint and rue.

Christians don’t use the phrase “ritually unclean” much anymore, and yet... for what other reason do we say confession before receiving communion? The reconciliation is not about what good deeds we’ve done, and in some way, it is not about the bad deeds we’ve done, it’s about making sure we search inside to see if we are making excuses, if we are “neglecting the justice and love of God” while we do our outwardly good deeds. You may look great, clean up well, be well regarded in your community, run a respectable law firm, and appear to all the world like someone to be greeted with respect, but if you also harbor anger and hardness of heart then you become corruption, endangering both to you, but to all who come in contact with you.

Thankfully, the Psalmist reminds us, “God is my strong rock and my refuge. Put your trust in him always, O people, pour out your hearts before him, for God is our refuge.” We are charged to do this work, but, as the responses in our Baptism ceremony remind us, we do not have to do this alone, but *with God’s help*. So, yes, we *must* search, and we must do the work of staying soft, of staying empathetic, of seeking justice and the love of God, of patiently doing good; we must—and I hope we will—with God’s help.

Amen.

Texts for October 16, 2019

[Romans 2:1-11](#);

[Psalm 62:1-9](#);

[Luke 11:42-46](#)



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