

“Harden Not Your Hearts”
A Sermon Delivered by Rev. John Balicki
5th Sunday in Lent
April 6, 2025
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church, Wilton, Maine

“Have a heart that never hardens, and a temper that never tires, and a touch that never hurts.” - Charles Dickens

I prayed for my heart to soften, to forgive her, and love her for what she did give me: life, great values, a lot of tennis lessons, and the best she could do. Unfortunately, the best she could do was terrible, thee the Minister of Silly Walks trying to raise an extremely sensitive young girl, and my heart remained hardened toward her.” – Anne Lamott

There are certain special verses in certain special psalms that may stick in our individual or collective memories. In Morning Prayer from the BCP, there is what’s called an invitational psalm, something to get us in the spirit, and one of those is Psalm 95 vv. 1-6. For many of the days of Lent an extra few verses are tacked on including one that has the tendency to stick in our minds, “If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts”. It could be called a Lenten mantra and as I reflected on our Lenten journey, it fits each of the past Sundays as well as today.

On the First Sunday in Lent, Jesus is out in the desert for 40 days. Fasting. Maybe you’ve had the experience of giving up something for Lent and just white-knuckling it all the way through. Just hanging on and not being in the spirit of the fast. That wasn’t Jesus who was present to himself and God to be in touch with his heart and not succumb to temptation. On the Second Sunday, as Jesus views Jerusalem, his heart is fully open as he foresees the pain that will come to himself and his people. On the Third Sunday, some people come to question Jesus about why bad things happen to people. Some people had been slaughtered by Pilate; others had a tower fall on them. Those with hard hearts felt like it must be because they were bad people but Jesus told a parable of giving an unproducing fig tree a second chance, a softer hearted approach. Then last Sunday Jesus told the Parable of the Prodigal Son or, as some prefer, the Parable of the Unforgiving Brother – a brother whose heart was hard and who couldn’t accept the forgiveness shown by his father toward his younger brother.

Stories and descriptions of many hard hearts, and today we come to one more – Judas. If you grew up with “Jesus Christ Superstar” as I did, perhaps you remember the haunting refrain during the song at his death, “Poor Old Judas; So long Judas”. This is the only Sunday in the three year lectionary where this disciple who is so well known, whose name

has become a synonym for being a traitor, is featured. And what do we learn about Judas in this moment, that his heart was becoming hard to Jesus if not completely hardened. He is critical of Mary's action, this extravagant perfuming of Jesus' feet. He justifies his criticism on Mary's action being impractical, founded on the basis that there were poor people who could have used the money spent on the perfume for higher needs. Perhaps hard to argue against, a sensible argument, let's give Judas the benefit of the doubt for the moment which the gospel writer was unwilling to do (labelling him a thief and a betrayer). What was Judas missing? Why was his heart so hard?

Judas was missing the context of the situation and was not in the present moment. Mary responds to the call of love in the moment. In that moment, as Jesus was in Bethany, just outside Jerusalem, just before the Passover, Mary could read the present time and read Jesus. There was a talk about how dangerous Jesus was becoming; having just raised her brother Lazarus, the chief priests were on the lookout for him trying to find a way to condemn him to death. And Mary can read Jesus, perhaps his exhaustion, his need for human touch, his need to be taken care of, his need to have one person understand the challenge of keeping on this mission he seems driven towards. Mary doesn't choose to love the poor in the abstract as Judas but sees someone in need at the very moment and doesn't harden her heart but opens it extravagantly. Jesus' words at the beginning of the gospels were the kingdom of God is at hand, in the now. Mary chooses that now while Judas hangs back because his heart couldn't go there.

So if you go to a modern cardiologist's office, there are all sorts of tests to measure the condition of our heart muscle: xrays, electrocardiograms, CT Scans, MRIs; we've done well in developing all these tests. But spiritually how do we assess our hardness our ability to love to be compassionate, not just those in our own immediate sphere but everyone? There's a lot of hardness of heart in our world right now, especially in our national politics, but the question is how do we respond? The way not to respond is to let our own hearts get harder, closed off, or so hard all we want to do is retaliate.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Let no man pull you so low as to hate him." In business, in politics and in every facet of our lives, it's easy to resort to an "us/them" mentality. Of course we're going to disagree, sometimes passionately, with others who cross our path. You, and you alone are in charge of your heart. Hate your boss? DON'T. Hate someone who abused a relationship? DON'T. Hate someone of a different color, different religion, different political ideology? DON'T. If we're not good at the biblical admonition to "speak the truth in love," then either get better, or stop speaking.

There is an additional piece here related to not hardening our hearts. As writer Mary Gordon puts it: "In the moment of the washing of 3rd feet, Jesus insists that beauty

matters: that the aesthetic can take precedence over the moral.” Think about it this way: in times of peril, pain, or trouble in your own life, what has comforted you the most? What has carried you through? The platitudes of a pragmatist? Or the lavish and “useless” gestures of someone who loves you? And you can’t appreciate beauty with a hard heart. The best you might do is a meager, “Oh, that’s nice where are we eating lunch”. Beauty might seem an odd concept to introduce at this time. It’s rarely been chosen as a Lenten penance. Yet cultivation and appreciation of beauty is one of the best ways to keep our hearts from hardening.

We have one more week of Lent and then Palm Sunday when we will hear about more hardness of heart that coalesced from chief priests to Roman leaders to put Jesus to death. But that’s next week. This week we have Mary of Bethany the extravagant one who saw a deep human need and met it – and we have Judas, Poor Old Judas, not in the moment, not meeting any need and ultimately hating himself for being that way.

“If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts”.