

Luke 11:37-54
Hearts of Stone
Sunday February 21st, 2016

A new patient, who was about to enter the hospital, saw two white-coated doctors searching through the flower beds.

"Excuse me," the patient said, "have you lost something?"

"No," replied one of the doctors. "We're doing a heart transplant for an IRS auditor and we want to find a suitable stone."

Hearts of stone, or hearts of flesh? Ezekiel speaks of God replacing our hearts of stone with hearts of flesh. Jesus speaks to Pharisees and Scribes who truly had hearts of stone, and not only did not want them to be changed or softened, but with pride, anger and self-righteousness hardened them even more.

The question is: Who in the world did these Scribes and Pharisees think they were? Who were these religious men of means of first-century Judaism, who continually confronted Jesus with roadblocks of reason, while Jesus confronted them with building blocks of Justice and Love? Who did they think they were?

Briefly, they can be described in this way. The Pharisees were religious purists who meticulously observed every minutia of the Jewish Law. If the Law called for a fast, they began their fast early and continued it late. If the Law called for a tithe, they gave a tithe and an offering and they made sure everybody knew it. You see, that was another characteristic of the Pharisees; they portrayed themselves as better than everyone else. Their name suggests it: **Pharisees: men who separated themselves.**

They refused to associate with the sinners around them, to the point where some actually attached blinders on the sides of their heads so they didn't have to look at the sinners.



Because of this, they frequently ran into walls and posts, and thus came to be known as “the bruised and bleeding Pharisees.”

The Scribes were associated with the Pharisees as lawyers and legal counselors. They were the experts in the Jewish Law. They determined how a law ought to be observed, and also how it might be shirked. They even crafted escape clauses that enabled them to do work on the Sabbath. Here is an example of Scribes’ advice for avoiding the law against work on the Sabbath.

To carry a burden is forbidden. He who carries anything, whether it be in his right hand, or in his left hand, or in his bosom, or on his shoulder, is guilty. But he who carries anything on the back of his hand, or with his foot, or with his mouth, or with his elbow, or with his ear, or with his hair, or with his money bag turned upside down, or between his money bag and his shirt, or in the fold of his shirt, or in his shoe, or in his sandal, is not guilty, because he does not carry it in the usual way of carrying it.

This is just one of many ways the Scribes devised to observe and avoid observing the Law. And most hypocritical of all, they then condemned anyone who did not do it their way, all of which was done in the name of religion and following the Law of God.

So one day, Jesus came to town; to eat dinner in the home of a well-known Pharisee. Jesus didn’t wash his hands before beginning the meal. The issue wasn’t that Jesus’ hands were dirty. It was that hand washing was a very big religious ritual before the meal and each course of the meal.

You had to put the water on your hands in a particular way starting with the fingers and then down to the wrist. It had to be a certain

amount of water and the rules went on and on. To omit the slightest detail of this was to sin for the Pharisee.

Jesus didn't observe this hand washing ritual and when asked about it, Jesus became very angry. Actually, Jesus exploded at his dinner host.

He said, "You Pharisees are all alike!" "You take great care in washing the outside; but only for appearance's sake, but meanwhile the inside of you is filthy." Jesus then began his list of warnings, his list of "woes". The point of the woes being, if they were as "particular about cleansing their hearts as they were about washing their hands, they would be better people." Barclay Luke P. 184

The first three woes/warnings were directed at the Pharisees and the next three to the Scribes.

"Woe to you Pharisees," Jesus said. "You give 10% of everything. Wheat, barley, mint, everything! But you fail to love God, and you fail to treat people with justice. Shame on you!"

"Woe to you Pharisees," Jesus continued, "because you always take the very best seats in the synagogue, in the very front row, and you sit there, not so you can see... but so that you can be seen! Shame on you."

"And woe to you Pharisees, for you tell people that if they touch a gravestone, even by accident, they will be unclean. And yet you Pharisees are walking gravestones!

Your faith is dead and you are full of rot. You don't even know it and you contaminate all who come in contact with you to listen to you."

At this point, a Scribe stood up and spoke to Jesus. "Teacher, when you speak to the Pharisees like this, you hurt our feelings and insult us too."

To which Jesus replied, **“Well woe to you too! Woe to you Scribes; you make rules for others to follow and then you invent ways for yourselves to evade your own rules.**

Woe to you scribes, because the only prophets you like are dead prophets, because you can and do ignore them. When living prophets come to you, you turn them away.

Woe to you scribes, for you have made the Scriptures a book of riddles that only confuse and confound the People. They go to you for direction and you get them lost. Shame on you too!”

The common thread in all of these woes is the fact that the Scribes and the Pharisees wanted to keep their hands on the gateway to the religious life and God. They wanted to determine what the rules were. They took upon themselves the power to decide who met the rules and who broke the rules. They wanted to preserve “their church” the way it was for them, the way they liked it.

They wanted nothing to change. **They wanted to control the lives of others and most damning of all, to control access to God.** They had seized the gateway, the access to God. In their pride they judged all others by their own way of life. That is why Jesus so brutally denounced them.

If there is one comforting fact in this story, it is that Jesus was not denouncing religious people in general. He was denouncing their legalism. He was criticizing their religious pride. **He was denouncing their obsession with religious details and missing out practicing the wider issues of love, justice and relationship.**

The application of this scripture to our lives today is both subtle and painful if we are honest with ourselves. If we met a Pharisee on the street today, he or she would look like us. Isn't it we who want to determine what the religious rules ought to be: isn't our individual Christian experience and belief on social issues the yardstick by which we measure other religious people and each other?

You see we have Lutheran Pharisees, Catholic Pharisees, Baptist Pharisees and shockingly, believe it or not, United Methodist Pharisees.

It happens whenever people are so convinced that their way is the only right way, that they dismiss others as being totally wrong.

Now, I'm not talking about doctrine here today. We need basic orthodox Christian doctrine in the church. What I am talking about is tolerance for disagreement and differences - respect and love in the midst of disagreement.

I'm not talking about church structure here. Every church needs structure and rules to get along. What I am talking about here has more to do with style and behavior.

How do we care for/love people who do not readily fit into our congregation's economic class, culture and age spectrum? Do we love them or subtly push them out? Do we dismiss them or learn to coexist with them? Or maybe worse yet, we do we invite them in at all?

I would submit to you that in most middle to upper middleclass churches "Pharisaism," an overt separation of church members from those in the world is subtle. It's not an overt declaration, "We don't want your kind here"; it's subtle, simply not inviting them in.

In terms of the poor, we are so ready to give them something to eat and to meet their other physical needs; but do we really invite them to sit next to us in the pew and worship God with us? Do we really want their children playing with our children? Do we want them to be a part of our lives? Oh, any excuse will do for not inviting them in and the Pharisee will grasp at not only religious laws, but other laws for not inviting the poor in.

I worked with the director of the Men's Homeless shelter in Mesa for many years. I tried, on several occasions, (like almost every time I saw her) to get her to join our church; because she said the following one night when I showed up with the youth group to serve the men their dinner. She said, "Now get this right. You are here to serve these men

not feed them. You feed animals. You serve people.” She grasped that we are all made in the image of God and I loved her attitude and invited her in.

Jesus proved on the cross that love is more important than the rules. Jesus proclaimed people more important than programs, race, class, or creed; and relationships are paramount above all! To be righteous is to be in a right relationship with God and others.

But Pharisees of every age disagree, so rather than embrace the people that Jesus embraces, the Pharisees choose to fiddle with the fine print, and that takes our focus away from invitation and mission and focuses it on minutia or each other. That’s when love and justice are ignored and condemnation is embraced.

One evening, when I was doing youth ministry, I took a group of youth to the roller skating rink. In the group were four huge teenagers who were members of a Crips Gang. Unbeknownst to me, there was also a group of youth there from a halfway house for juvenile delinquents, some of whom were from a Bloods Gang. Bloods and Crips street gangs were and are mortal enemies.

The kids from the halfway house began throwing gang signs and a huge fight ensued. Women ran screaming from the building with crying children in their arms. The police were called. The building was emptied and the roller rink shut down for the night. Through pure force of will I got the four Gang members who came with our youth group into my van so that the fight would not continue in the parking lot. These four boys outweighed me by over 900 lbs.

Now I was so mad at them and they were so determined to continue the fight that I swore at them. I don’t remember exactly what I said but the word “damn” was in there somewhere.

Well, in the next two weeks, did I hear from anyone that was upset that my youth group had gotten in a huge fight that led to women running screaming from a skating rink with crying babies? Did I hear about the fact the police were called and responded? The rink shut

down? We were banned from that place? No, the complaint that was made to the SPRC from the mom of one of the boys was that I used the word “damn” in referring to their youths’ behavior.

The point is she didn’t get it. There were larger issues to deal with. For one her son was in a street Gang. And Jesus’ detractors didn’t get it either. On the contrary, they resented being scolded. Their hearts were hardened and they responded with ridicule, criticism and rejection.

Do you recall how this story ended?

When Jesus left that place, the scribes and the Pharisees began to criticize him bitterly and ask him questions about many things, trying to lay traps for him and catch him saying something wrong.

Once a heart has turned to stone, it is difficult to soften it again. Sometimes it takes humility to turn the heart around. Sometimes it takes confession. And sometimes it even takes death, a death on a cross.

Whatever it takes for you, I encourage you to lay your heart at the foot of the cross today. And let the softening process begin.

In the end our hard hearts can only be softened by God as Ezekiel 36:26 states, “A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh”.

But it is a choice to let God do this! In your hands you hold a stone heart. It is a prayer to God to remove our hearts of stone.



It is a prayer to remove our pride, our judgmentalism, our demand that others practice the faith and be exactly like us. It is a prayer to invite the stranger in. As prayer I will ask you to place that heart at the foot of the cross in a moment, but one final thought.

On Wednesday, as I left my favorite Circle K, I realized I hadn't seen one of the clerks there for quite a while. I had spoken with this young lady about church and faith and she told me once about how much she enjoyed being in a church youth group as a teenager.

I realized I missed the opportunity to invite her to be in the Young Adult Bible Study I lead on Saturday nights. I had hesitated in inviting her because I was afraid she wouldn't fit in. She has either quit or moved to another location and the Young Adult Bible Study is poorer for her absence.

"A self-righteous, hard hearted judgmentalism drives others away," but so too does a soft let's just not invite them in. We all suffer from this at one time or the other.

But today, let us pray as we bring these stone hearts forward that whatever the issue is that Jesus will soften and heal our hearts.



May he give us a caring heart of flesh and remove our heart of stone.

In Jesus' name amen.

Bring your stones now to the foot of the cross.

Adapted from "A Journey of Stones" by Steven Molin