

February 12, 2017
Deuteronomy 30:15-20
Matthew 5:21-37

The Heart of the Matter

Jesus is getting right to the heart of things today. While Valentine's Day brings us heart-shaped boxes of chocolate and heart-shaped jewelry for our sweethearts, Jesus is encouraging us to get the real heart of things.

To our hearts. The heart inside each one of us. Where we keep all intentions and our desires and our fears. Where we treasure what we love, and justify what we do. That heart of ours that longs to do what is good and right and true, and yet also longs to punch the guy who was so rude to us in the hardware store. Our sensitive, wild, passionate, tender hearts, the inner-most core of who we are; that's what Jesus wants to talk about today.

In our reading from the gospel of Matthew, Jesus is preaching about our hearts in his Sermon on the Mount. He is preaching to his disciples, his closest followers; not a large crowd of people like we might expect. He has taken them alone, on purpose, up a mountain so he can have a heart to heart with them. Because he wants his disciples to know where his heart is. He wants to teach them, his closest followers, how to follow

him. Like a good coach instructing the team, he tells them that if they want to do big things with him, their hearts will have to be in it.

This moment on the mountain could be such a Hoosiers moment for Jesus and his disciples, except that it's not. Jesus' instructions to the

team make us cringe. He's not the big-hearted, gentle Jesus we expect.

He isn't saying nice words about being nice. He is saying hard words that are hard to hear. About cutting off body parts and gouging out eyes.

And that there are consequences for bad choices that could involve hell and fire and the evil one. And Jesus flatly demands that his disciples up

their game. Can they take it to the next level? Can they go from a

superficial faith to a deep, personal faith? Are they ready for

righteousness that isn't external, but internal (Heart) as well?

These words from Jesus, they are kind of scary, if we take them to heart.

If we take them seriously and think about who we are and why we do

what we do. And how much of our hearts are really engaged in life.

Mostly we do what we have to do. We do what we ought to do because

that's how life works. OK, we will go the speed limit, most of the time.

We will eat some kind of vegetable, nearly every day. We will go to

work and go to school. And pay our taxes. And be civil to our neighbors. Because that's what we have to do. It doesn't have much to do with our hearts really, it's just how things work.

But Jesus says that's not how it works with him. That's not the kind of disciple he's looking for. He's not looking for someone who does stuff without thinking. Or follows him because they ought to. He's looking for someone who wants to follow him with their heart. Who wants to love God not just obey God. Who wants to be more than religious like the Pharisees and the scribes of his day. Because those religious folks had turned everything around. They had turned this relationship with God into a set of chores and requirements. Their hearts weren't in it. Their hearts were elsewhere, not with God.

The writer of Deuteronomy says the same thing today. He tells the people of God that God is after their hearts. God isn't just after their obedience or their allegiance or their offerings. God was and is and always has been after our hearts. God wants love and life for us, for all of God's creation. So God gives the people the law through Moses. God gives them practices so their community can flourish. Like a good

parent, God gives structure so there can be life and love. And then invites the people into the dance. But over time, the rules given in love became disconnected from that love. And the hearts of the people became disconnected too. And the laws became less about life for all and more about life as it has to be done. Jesus knew those laws in Deuteronomy. And he knew they were given in love for love and he wanted his disciples to know that too.

So, today, Jesus re-explains the law to his disciples. He gets to the heart of it. He says it's not about being legal. It's about being good. It's not about staying out of trouble with God. It's about sharing in God's love, God's desire for a new heaven and a new earth. And putting that at the center of your being, in your heart. That's how his disciples need to learn to live.

Jesus tells them: You know what the law says. You know what it's in Deuteronomy and Leviticus. You know it says you shouldn't murder anyone. But I'm telling you, that's not enough. It's not enough to just not murder people. God wants you not to have murder in your heart. God wants you not to let rage fester inside you. Not even to let

yourselves be angry. Don't carry around resentment or malice or mean thoughts about others in your heart. It's as bad as murder.

“But I say to you: Do not be angry. Do not call someone a fool. If you have an argument, stop what you are doing, and fix it.” Maybe the disciples were thinking-- maybe we are thinking: “Woah. Come on Jesus, what's the big deal? We all get a little angry now and then. We all have our moments and our pet peeves and our things we love to hate and usually no one ends up getting murdered. This ‘no anger’ thing is a little much, don't you think?” But Jesus knows us. And he knows what our hearts are like and he knows that whatever is in our hearts will affect us physically, emotionally, and spiritually. A study done by Harvard Medical School, showed that people who were angry were six times more likely to suffer heart attacks by age 55 and three times more likely to develop a cardiac or blood vessel disease. The thing about anger is that it doesn't stay put. And if it's at the center of who we, then it will become who we are.

What's in our hearts matters. The thoughts and desires we carry around inside, all of them matter to our lives as disciples. Even if we aren't

technically doing anything wrong. Even if it's not a crime to curse someone or cut them down or gossip about them. Even if we aren't breaking any laws when we blast someone in an email or rant on Facebook. Even if we aren't doing anything illegal when we roll our eyes at the young folks or the old folks and make fun of their music or mock the way they act. Even if it's not a crime when we badmouth liberals or conservatives or Californians or red necks. Even if we think we have a right to be angry. That we have a right to say what we want; we have a right. Actually, says Jesus, actually, if you are my disciple, you don't. You don't have a right to be angry just because it is legal. You don't have a right to ignore the darkness in your heart. Because what's in your heart makes you who you are. And it will come out in what you do. And as my disciple, I need your heart to hold and share the love of God. Nothing else can do that. Nothing else but your heart. That's why your heart matters the most to me.

Jesus doesn't want disciples who just follow the rules. He doesn't want disciples who have faith on the outside, but not on the inside. He wants disciples with heart, who will live with their hearts and lead with their

hearts. Who know that intentions matter. That authenticity matters. That what is in your heart is what you become. And we are meant to become people after God's own heart. Because God is after ours.

You know what the commandments say. You know what's in the Bible. But I'm telling you, it's not enough. You have heard it said, don't lie. But I say to you, don't even swear about telling the truth. Don't try to make yourself sound more reliable. Just be reliable. Just say yes or no and let your integrity speak for itself.

You have heard it said divorce just requires a piece of paper, right men? In the Jewish legal system of the 1st century, that's true. Men can legally discard women whenever they want. But I'm telling you that that's not good enough. Take marriage seriously, men. Think about the women you will hurt, think about the poverty they will face and the ridicule. Think about how their lives are ruined forever because according to the law you could divorce them for burning bread or failing to produce a son.

You know the rules. But this is about something more than rules. It's about being a people after God's own heart as God is after ours. You

have heard it said, don't commit adultery. But I say, don't even look at another person with that in mind. Don't allow yourself to make someone into an object of desire. Because no one is an object. Everyone has a heart.

In our culture, desire is what drives us. Cosmetics and clothing and diet and exercise programs. The music industry. Hollywood. All the magazines at the front of the grocery store. And that doesn't even touch the Larry Flints and the Hugh Hefners of the world or the 3 billion dollar a year internet sites that encourage us to celebrate lust and impersonal intimacy. We aren't breaking any rules, we say. We aren't doing anything illegal. We aren't harming anyone, really. But Jesus says that we are. If we objectify people and treat them like a bunch of body parts, then that's what they become to us. They become objects, not people, made in the image of God. Jesus is serious about this. He is so serious about not treating others like body parts, that he makes us think about our own body parts and what it would be like to lose them. Because sex is not a joke or a harmless thrill or a punchline on TV. Our bodies, our

intimate relationships matter. And if we objectify others with our hearts, then we will never find our hearts true desire.

Jesus wants more from his disciples. He wants them to do more than what they can. Like making racist or sexist comments because they can. Like paying someone a wage that won't support them because they can. Like charging 400% for a Pay Day loan because they can. Like dumping toxic waste into the ocean because they can. Like ignoring their neighbors because they can. Jesus doesn't want us to do what we can. He wants us to live entirely as the people of God. To live with our hearts full of the love of God that does not do the bare minimum for us. Full of the love of Jesus Christ who did not come to give us just a part of himself, but all of himself; his whole heart. Because all of us, every bit of us is made for God and loved by God.

On Wednesday nights, about fourteen kids gather with Lee and Sara and our Locally Grown leaders and they bare their hearts to one another.

They share what they struggle with; those deep dark questions of who they are and why they are here that many of us big people have grown numb to. And they are encouraged and challenged and strengthened.

And these kids, some of them for the first time, know that God loves them. That God's heart is for them. That God made them to have life and love. Because what else is there really? What else matters more for them, for us than our hearts? Because our hearts are what matter to God.