

Loving God With Our Hearts

A Message by James R. Newby

Text: Mark 12:38-40

The reading I just shared from the Gospel of Mark is in a particularly contentious section of the Gospel. Here we have Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees and other religious leaders trying to entrap Jesus. Jesus is not very gentle with them, but continues to teach them about the Kingdom of God.

Just prior to this passage from Mark, Jesus commends one of the scribes for being open to the Kingdom of God. The scribe asked Jesus, “What is the greatest commandment?” He agreed with the answer that Jesus had given him, saying, “You are right, to love God with all one’s heart and mind and strength and to love one’s neighbor as one’s self is, indeed, much more important than any other part of religion.”

So...What is the issue with *these* scribes? There seem to be several symptoms of their wrongdoing, but the root cause is that instead of

glorifying God, they have glorified themselves. And, instead of loving their neighbor and caring for the most vulnerable in their society, they have “devoured widow’s houses” and have recited long prayers for the sake of appearances.

Jesus is very direct with the hypocritical scribes and says, “They will receive the greater condemnation.” They are supposed to be the shepherds of the people of Israel, but instead, Jesus says, they are leading people astray.

Now, it is easy to commend Jesus for his words, and to dislike these scribes. But let’s take a moment and think about these leaders. Let’s back up a few years to when they were young people searching for God’s call on their lives. Why did they become scribes in the first place? Certainly a few may have entered into the vocation for the wrong reasons, but the majority probably wanted to faithfully serve God with all of their hearts.

So what went so badly wrong in their lives that Jesus specifically denounces them? I believe it is this, and it is a problem with

political and religious leadership throughout the ages: *The scribes began with a desire to do good, but they were swept away by power, praise, lobbyists and possessions, and slowly turned away from their first love.* It is not just that the scribes had gotten it a little wrong; they had gotten it exactly wrong! They had become addicted to praise and power, instead of loving God with all of their hearts minds, strengths and souls, and their neighbors as themselves. The scribes had fallen into the same trap that so many fall into—the one where we begin by wanting to serve God and do good for the world, and end up desiring only that the world does good for us.

The failing of the scribes is particularly troubling because they understood God’s law with their minds better than anyone else. They had studied the scriptures. They knew them verbatim. But the knowledge that they had learned, had not traveled that long distance of a few inches from their heads to their hearts. Perhaps this is why Jesus taught so often through stories and observations

instead of lists and facts—*so that our hearts might comprehend. For when our hearts are changed, everything changes.*

Throughout most of my life, I have found that I have been much more comfortable in my head and mind than in my heart. Earlier in life the development of my intellect was my central focus. And then my father died, and my mother died, and my mentor died, and I went through a divorce, and our only child left home for college in Michigan. My wisdom, what little I have, has come through the avenues of pain and chaos. I am reminded of the wonderful line from the Play *Harvey*, where the main character, Elwood P. Dowd says, "Years ago my mother said to me, 'In this world, Elwood, you must be oh so smart or oh so pleasant.' Well for years I was oh so smart. I recommend pleasant."

The scribes...They understood the Kingdom of God in their heads...they were oh so smart...but they did not understand it in their hearts. In their effort to protect the law of God from corruption, they themselves had corrupted its very foundation.

They sought to do good, but instead of helping people to keep God's law, they actually prevented people from coming to God. They wanted to love God, but ended up loving only themselves. They wanted to protect the vulnerable, but devoured them instead.

A couple of years ago now, Elizabeth and I attended a Taft Lecture sponsored by the Christ Cathedral. The speaker was William Barber, an African-American minister from North Carolina, and the Executive Director of the Poor Peoples Campaign. He gave us a brief overview of scripture, pointing out the number of times the Prophets and Jesus in his teaching call attention to the poor and vulnerable members of society, and how societies through the centuries have treated them. His lecture was really like a tent revival meeting, where he pointed to the expendables of our society and their leadership role in the spiritual renewal that our society so desperately needs. He talked about how such expendables are the hope of our civilization, rejecting the divisiveness that so many of today's political leaders have espoused. We sang together what is the

Poor People's Campaign's rallying cry: "Someone is hurting my brother, my sister, my child, and it has gone on far too long. We are not going to be silent anymore." At the end of his lecture, with those in the crowd standing and applauding, he invited gay persons, transgendered persons, African Americans, Native Americans, Latinas and Latinos, Jews, Muslims, Native Americans and Asian Americans to come forward and stand together. And as we continued to applaud, William Barber closed his remarks, saying, "These are the ones who have been rejected by our society, and with whom Jesus stood, and these are the ones who will renew our society." Not the Scribes, not the Pharisees, not the Sadducees, but those who our society deems expendables.

So where are we in this story? Certainly we know a great deal about the faith that we profess, but has it seeped into our hearts where real transformation takes place? You may have heard me say, many times for that matter, that I believe Quakers are in the transformation business. Traveling the hills and dales of Northern

England two weeks ago, listening to the stories of the Valiant 60 missionaries, as well as George Fox and Margaret Fell, reinforced this belief. “Here is my secret,” we read in *The Little Prince*, “It is very simple: It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is *essential* is invisible to the eye.” And it was the philosopher/mathematician, Blaise Pascal who wrote, "The heart has reasons that the mind knows not of." May we seek to follow our hearts and seek the reasons of the heart which will propel us on our continuing spiritual journeys of loving God, and loving our neighbors.