

## *Where the Heart Rules*

Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost

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Texts: Song of Solomon 2.8-13;  
Psalm 45.1-2, 6-9;  
James 1.17-27;  
Mark 7.1-8, 14-15, 21-23

When I was growing up there were constant battles at school around the practice of wearing hats indoors. It was usually about wearing baseball caps. Students were forever pushing against the rule that forbid them to wear hats in the classroom. It came up at church a fair bit as well and I remember watching the adults who would get so bent out of shape about it and thinking that it was such a silly argument and was always surprised by how heated the conversations became. Respect seemed to be the central concern. The adults insisted that wearing a hat inside was disrespectful and the rule existed to make sure that these kids became respectful human beings in the world. The kids wearing hats just liked them. They didn't have a thought in their mind or an intention in their heart to be disrespectful. They weren't being rebellious for the sake of thumbing their noses at authority. They were simply unwilling to follow a rule that made no sense to them. It was about saying "I can wear hat AND respect you. These two things aren't really connected."

It strikes me that this was precisely what was going on between the Pharisees and Jesus' disciples. The Pharisees believed that their hearts were pure because their hands were clean. They were rigid in their adherence to the law and chastised Jesus and his disciples for not doing the same. We look at those rules and they seem arbitrary and absurd to us in much the same way that my friends felt about the whole hat wearing deal. There was an original intention in these purity laws. There was symbolic meaning in these laws and they were meant to set the Hebrews apart from their neighbors so that they would not be absorbed by them and begin to follow their religious practices.

The intention was to keep them from idolatry and to make it possible for them to be faithful to God and to maintain lives of love for one another. Problem was that the rules themselves became the primary focus of people's attention rather than faithfulness to God and love of neighbor. We often attribute the summary of the law to Jesus when he was in fact quoting from the Old Testament. The Old Testament itself makes clear that the summary of these laws, even the purity laws, is to love God and to love neighbor. That intention of the heart had been lost in the adherence to the rules.

When the Pharisees challenge Jesus around these rules, Jesus' response is harsh and to the point: calling them hypocrites, he condemns them for following the law while their hearts were far from God. Jesus is calling them beyond the rules themselves to the attitude of heart behind them. "Wear a hat/don't wear a hat just show respect!"

Mark is insistent in showing that for Jesus the central message of the gospel is not about purity – that visceral reaction around what is clean and unclean or what is natural and unnatural. The central message of the gospel is about God's gracious inclusion and invitation for ALL people to enter into a relationship with God and experience redemption. The work of redemption is designed to provide for our forgiveness and to set us free so that we can love fully and without reserve.

Following rules has a place in human development. Think about the ways that we raise children to become responsible, loving adults. I am, as you know, deep in the middle of that venture. I can testify to the fact that children left to their own devices are rather self-centered and self-absorbed. They need help learning to understand that they even have neighbors, let alone what it looks like for them to love those neighbors as themselves. What we really want is for our children to become generous, but it starts by certain rules we teach: "when you have a friend over to play you each take turn with the toy or game." I know some families where computer time is shared with a timer to be sure that everyone gets the same amount of access. The keeping track of turns and the setting of timers is necessary because without that structure and without those rules we get caught up in our own desires and lose track of other people. (And it's not just kids!!)

The hope is that eventually it won't be necessary to use rules to ensure fairness or generosity. The hope is that we will become people who are personally invested in fairness and actually find joy out of being generous. The intention of the gospel is for us to move beyond the sinfulness of our fallen nature to grab hold of that deeper nature - the part of us that reflects the nature of God – the part of us created in the image of God.

It's interesting to read the Song of Solomon in light of this discussion between Jesus and the Pharisees. The Song of Solomon is a love song and a steamy one at that. Phyllis Trible, an OT scholar in her book *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*,<sup>1</sup> was the first one who invited me to look at this love song as a counterpoint to the third chapter of Genesis. The third chapter of Genesis describes the impact of human sin on human life. It's called the curse – chapter 3 of Genesis. Not that God cursed us. This isn't a description of what God did TO us. It's a description of what sin does to us. With sin in the picture it will now be hard work to get food from the earth. With sin in the picture new life will come at the cost of pain. With sin in the picture the mutuality and delight of sexual love will now include dynamics of power and struggle.

So Genesis 3, in describing the fate of women who love men, says: "Your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you." Song of Solomon is a reversal of the curse from Genesis and celebrates the passion and equality of a love that is untainted. Genesis reads: "Your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you." In Song of Solomon, the woman sings, "my beloved is mine and I am his." The woman's desire is for her beloved but this time, he returns her love with his own. Rules about roles and propriety and concern for appropriateness are nowhere seen in this celebration of human love. It is a glimpse of life under the reign of God where inequality and oppression are transformed into mutuality and respect. This image of love untainted by sin has been God's intention for us from the very beginning.

We like to think of ourselves as enlightened, modern people who do not fall into traps like the Pharisees. We are far too sophisticated. We are not

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<sup>1</sup> Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1978).

rigid fundamentalists. This message to us is like preaching to the choir.....or is it?

My sense is that if we are really honest with ourselves we can find some corners of our hearts that are just as rigid as the Pharisees we despise. Some rules we have for our worship for instance. The kind of music we require or the sorts of prayers that resonate with us. The kinds of programs or emphasis in ministry that must be present in order for us to feel as if the church is really the church. Some behaviors that we find utterly un-settling and out of place, or demands we have before we will be generous. When hard pressed we can't really articulate a genuine moral objection. It's just about our sense of what is proper or natural or appropriate.

What Jesus pushes us to do in response to the gospel today is to go past the outward expression to the inward intention of the heart. He is calling for a kind of love that is not governed by rules, and doesn't have limits, and is spontaneous and free and generous. The gospel calls on us today to let go of our demands around love and the limits we place on our generosity and to step into the realm of God's grace where the heart rules and where the very nature of God is expressed in the ways we live each day.

Last night as I was thinking of this text, this Word from God today, I pulled out an old song book from my college days by Susan Ashton because I was remembering this song called the "Better Angels of our Nature."<sup>2</sup> I wanted to share some of the text of that song as we close:

He fell to his knees and he cried out for mercy  
Heart-felt confessionals to an angry mob  
But vengeance was theirs as they bellowed for justice  
"Death to the man who has sinned against God."

I joined in the chant feeling so high and mighty  
Pointing the finger from up on my throne  
'Til I looked in his tears and I caught my reflection

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<sup>2</sup> Words and music by Wayne Kirkpatrick © 1992 Emily Boothe, Inc./Magic Beans Music (BMI).  
Recorded by Susan Ashton on her album *Angels of Mercy*, 1992.

And I knew that I could not cast the first stone.

Let the gavel fall slowly tho' truth's been revealed  
Sequester the jury for a moment to feel  
And in the courts of compassion I hope we can appeal  
To the better angels of our nature.

Angels of mercy, angels of light  
Angels of darkness, angels of might  
Angels with voices that whisper so clear  
Who do I lean to, who do I hear?

We are building our world with a fevered emotion  
While trying to keep it from coming apart  
But as we reach for the dream can we still reach within us  
We won't have the hope if we don't have the heart.

'Cause we're tossed in the gale of a moral decline  
As we drink from the grail of society's wine  
But at humanity's table I hope we choose to dine  
With the better angels of our nature.

Amen.