

“Taking Grace to Heart”

Psalms 16:6-8; Acts 24:10-15; 1 Peter 4:7-11
Jeremiah 7:9-10; Luke 12:28-34; John 7:37-39

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Why do you do what you do? When someone on the street asks you for a little money, how do you make the decision? What if a friend asks you to do something that you don't think is quite right, something that's just on the edge of being OK? How do we decide to do what we do?

On my sabbatical this summer, one of the places we went to was the Northumbria Community. Picking up on an old monastic tradition, their community has a rule of life. They suggest that by having this rule of life—availability and vulnerability—it helps them make the decisions about what they do, why they do what they do. I want to suggest that I think we all have a rule of life in some way or other, whether we've decided exactly what that rule of life is or not. I wonder if it's not the case that how that rule of life influences our life fits with some of these scriptures.

Last week we talked a little bit about the idea of thinking and how important it was, how we can learn from it. It feels to me that in our world we give precedence to thinking about things. However, if I say, “I'll think about it,” does that really suggest that I'm really going to grab hold of something and do it? “I'll think about it...”

Last week I noted that our thinking is not always unhindered or undirected. I suggested that if we get angry, for example, sometimes that anger begins to shape what we think about. I don't know about you, but I've had those situations when I've gotten angry or had other strong feelings about something that those emotions seemed to direct my thinking and I couldn't get out of the loop.

Mark Malina, who looks at Biblical times sociologically, suggests that in ancient times people had a three-zone personality. He suggests that one of those zones was emotion-infused thought or thought-infused emotions. Thoughts and emotions were fused together in the way ancients saw us as people. This is the one I want to talk about. (The others are communication and action.) He suggests that in the ancient world there wasn't that separation between thought and emotion. That's something that we've done since then. It often feels like I'm not supposed to have emotions; I'm supposed to be a rational decision-maker. Isn't that what economists tell us—that we're all rational and make rational decisions about everything in our lives? Do you know anybody who makes rational decisions about everything in their lives? Sometimes I *wish* I could make rational decisions about everything in my life.

So if we've got this other part to ourselves, this sense of emotion that is at work, maybe we need to get intelligent about it. That's what they've begun to talk about now—emotional intelligence. Basically, it's how we deal with other people and their emotions. How do we deal with our own emotions and what role do they have to play?

When I begin to think about the idea of emotions, I begin to think about my heart. I begin to think about the internal stuff in us that shapes who we are. My guess is that the rule of life that we have is somehow involved in how our heart is shaped, the set of experiences we have had that we relate to feelings, a sense of how those feelings and things we do work together. Habits of the heart. It's about the way our hearts begin to be shaped. Some of you may know that there's a book by that title, "Habits of the Heart" by Robert Bellah. It's about the habit of Americans to be individualistic. It's a habit of the heart.

I think, growing up in my family, particularly from my mother's side, there was a sense that life was serious. Humor was not something that was appropriate. You were supposed to be decent and in order kinds of folks, always serious about what you did and what you thought. That's a habit of the heart that I grew up with. You may notice that. I'm learning to move beyond that habit.

What I want to suggest is that there are a range of possibilities for the human heart and that over the course of our lives we create these habits of the heart. And yet, even in those who we think have hardened hearts, perhaps there's still possibility. There's a story in *Time* recently about how they are bringing rescue dogs into a maximum security prison and having hardened criminals teach the dogs to be good dogs. It says in the article that when they began to talk about these dogs, some of the hardened criminals would cry because they were so attached.

All I'm suggesting is that our hearts have this wide range and they can become shaped by the habits we've formed. So the question for me is that if our hearts shape our sense of the world according to our feelings, what can change that? There's a hint of it, I think, in that last story. A little love entered in. For many, I think what truly changes peoples' hearts is when our hearts are open enough to hear the love of God and to encounter it.

I think the thing that really hardens people's hearts the most is when they feel that they are not valued, not cared for, that the world is a place that's not good for them, or somehow they're not good for the world, or that they are just no good. But it is when we hear that God so loved the world that he gave his only son so that we might know that love, it is then that God's grace—the surprise gift of love—enters in. When that grace intersects with our hearts, I think that's when we begin to change.

So the scripture says, "Be stewards of the manifold grace of God." One of the things I don't think I have ever been taught is how to be a steward of my own heart. But what I think that means is paying attention to the kinds of experiences I have and how they shape me, and how I can focus on things like the love of God, the love people have given me, the beauty of the world around me. This focus begins to shape our hearts.

If nothing else, what Peter says is, "Love one another; it covers a multitude of sins," and it begins to shape our hearts. It is as we accept and recognize that we are valued and loved by God that we can begin to let our hearts soften and be shaped by God.

Then, perhaps, exactly what Jesus said can happen. Out of our hearts, rivers of life can flow. I sure wish I could say I was there, that I felt like out of my life and out of my heart a river of life was flowing.

But I think I am being led, being changed. I think God is offering that we together become a people out of whose heart the river of life will flow, the Spirit is evident, the grace of God is among us that we can be stewards of the manifold grace of God. That's the way the people became people of The Way. I don't think they just decided "here's our set of ideas about who we are." I think people actually noticed the way they lived because their hearts had been changed, shaped. So they saw that change in the way they lived and they became the people of The Way.

We are invited to be those people, to let God shape our hearts. Amen.