

SERMON
Church of the Holy Communion, Memphis, Tennessee
The Reverend Alexander H. Webb II (“Sandy”)
October 4, 2015

The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Revised Common Lectionary ~ Proper 22B
Mark 10:2-16

“The Law of Hardened Hearts”

In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

On my first day as a freshman at Hamilton College – an historic institution worthy of every bright young person’s consideration – I read the student handbook in its entirety. I may have been the only student to do so, but I have always been a rules follower, and it seemed important for me to know the rules.

Most of Hamilton’s policies were commonsensical: You may not plagiarize, you may not disobey a college official, you may not use illegal drugs. But, then I came across this little gem: “Hot tubs and [swimming] pools are not permitted inside or outside the [dormitories].”¹

From where do you suppose that rule came? Did some foresightful college official pull the “no hot tubs” rule out of thin air, or is this rule perhaps the trophy of an enterprising student who did something that was not technically banned? I suspect the latter, and I suspect that this student has gone on to a brilliant career in politics.

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The source of rules is a matter of concern for Jesus and his Pharisee questioners in today’s reading from St. Mark’s Gospel. Jesus is teaching his disciples about the Kingdom of God. The rules are different in God’s kingdom, and his disciples need to know the rules.

When the Pharisees approach, they test Jesus by asking him a difficult question. The subject of their inquiry is divorce, and subsequently remarriage after divorce, but they could have asked about almost anything. Their intention was not to learn, but to embarrass. Jesus’ response embarrasses them.

“Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” they ask. “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.” But Jesus said to them, “Moses wrote this commandment for you because of your hardness of heart.”² What an indictment: The law was only written because of your indifference to other people. The law that you love so much was only made necessary by your hardened hearts.

¹ Available online: <http://www.hamilton.edu/student-handbook/residential-life/residence-hall-safety-policies>

² I have reversed the two clauses of this sentence for ease of oral delivery. The original text of Mark 10:5 (NRSV) reads as follows: “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you.”

The phrase “hardness of heart” would have been familiar to the Pharisees. Scripture says that Pharaoh kept the Israelites in bondage because his heart was hardened.³ The Prophet Ezekiel writes, “[God] will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.”⁴ From the moment that sin entered the beauty of God’s creation, the Good Lord knew that humanity was not going to be inclined to selflessness and respect. So, Moses gave us a law that would remind us how God’s chosen people are supposed to live.

On the topic of harvesting: “[You] shall not reap to the very edges of your field...you shall leave them for the poor and for the alien.”⁵ Did this rule come out of thin air, or might the farming class have been living in plenty while the poor had nothing to eat?

On the topic of rest: “Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the LORD...”⁶ Did this rule come out of thin air, or might God’s people have been running themselves ragged – endangering their health, neglecting their families, forgetting their prayers?

On the topic of generosity: “All tithes from the land, whether the seed from the ground or the fruit from the tree, are the LORD’S...”⁷ Did this rule come out of thin air, or might God’s people have been forgetting the source of all their blessings? Might they have been focused on what they did not have rather than what they did?

During his ministry, Moses issued 613 ordinances, from which we can infer many of the ways in which our ancient ancestors fell short of God’s expectations. We may not observe Moses’ laws anymore, but perhaps we can still identify with some of the inclinations that underlie them.

Since coming to Memphis, many of you have taught me what true generosity looks like. You have shown me what it means to give away the money that we all want, to offer the time that none of us have, and to dedicate yourself to the future of a divided city. You are givers, and mentors, and agents of change. I do some of those things, but I do not always roll my window down for stoplight panhandlers. I do not seek out enough opportunities to give back to my new city. I do not always prize my health above my work. I do not always think about my giving before my spending and my saving.

Perhaps hardness of heart is a matter of degrees. The Pharisees asked Jesus about a provision of the law that protects women from being shuttled from one husband to another and back again without their consent.⁸ This hardness of heart is easy to see, but some hardnesses are less evident; Jesus’ answer speaks to them all.

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³ Examples include Exodus 8:15, 8:19, 8:32, 9:7, 9:12, 9:34-35, along with others. In interpreting these passages, consider the distinction between when “Pharaoh’s heart was hardened” and when “God hardened Pharaoh’s heart.”

⁴ Ezekiel 36:26 (NRSV)

⁵ Leviticus 23:22 (NRSV)

⁶ Leviticus 31:15 (NRSV)

⁷ Leviticus 27:30, 27:32 (NRSV)

⁸ Cf., Deuteronomy 24:1-4

Shortly after I finished at Hamilton, I moved to New York City to pursue ordination. One of my mentors in those early days counseled me in this way: “Sandy, a priest needs to be tough.” The harshness of his phrase stuck with me, and only after a decade of reflection have I figured out why.

God needs all of his people, not just his priests, to be strong – strong enough to confront despair, strong enough to endure uncertainty, strong enough to speak the truth. But, God does not need any of us to be tough. To be tough is to harden our hearts, to evade pain by avoiding love, to become unconcerned with the suffering of others. Moses wrote his commandments because it is all too easy for us to harden our hearts, to be toughened up by the realities of a scary world. Moses wants us to live selflessly, and Jesus even more selflessly still.

We may not be able to change the world, but we can make a difference in our little corner of it. We can live our lives in a way that is more generous, more sustainable, more concerned with the needs of others. And, by finding the strength to live our lives in just these ways, we can help to usher in the Kingdom of God.

Amen.