

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Going With the Heart”

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Mark 6:30-46, 53-56

30 The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. 31 He said to them, ‘Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.’ For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. 32 And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. 33 Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. 34 As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. 35 When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, ‘This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; 36 send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.’ 37 But he answered them, ‘You give them something to eat.’ They said to him, ‘Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?’ 38 And he said to them, ‘How many loaves have you? Go and see.’ When they had found out, they said, ‘Five, and two fish.’ 39 Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. 40 So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. 41 Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. 42 And all ate and were filled; 43 and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. 44 Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.

45 Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. 46 After saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain to pray.

53 When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. 54 When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, 55 and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. 56 And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the market-places, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

Earl was the recent recipient of a quadruple bypass procedure. At fifty-two years of age he had suffered a heart attack. A heavy smoker and an equally heavy eater, his

arteries were so blocked that the bypasses were his only option to life. Following the surgery, Earl did quite well. He spent a couple of weeks away from home in the hospital and in a transition care facility. Two months later, in front of his entire family, Earl announced that he had lost 25 pounds since the surgery. He talked about his new lease on life that came with the gift of clean arteries. He was on a diet. He had stopped smoking. He was taking a daily walk for exercise.

Three weeks after the announcement, a friend reported seeing Earl again. He noticed Earl's car in the parking lot of a donut shop, only three blocks away from where Earl lived. And when he looked inside the door of the donut shop, there was Earl, sitting at the counter, sipping coffee, eating glazed fritter, and smoking a cigarette. Obviously nothing had really changed in Earl's life. Despite his reconditioned heart, he did not have it in his heart to diet, to exercise, to stop smoking, and to change his life.

One of the frustrating parts of our human relationship is trying to get the people around us to change into what we want them to be. Whether it be a spouse, a parent, a child, a co-worker, or a friend; getting people to change is often an exercise in failure. We can preach and nag until we are blue in the face but sometimes nothing will bring change. And it is human wisdom for it to be easier to see the need for change in others than it is to understand the need to change ourselves.

One of you shared the following story with me a few weeks ago. A young preacher, fresh out of seminary gave his first sermon to his new church. It was a good, solid, sermon and the congregation was inspired. They had high hopes for the future of their new minister. The second week the young preacher gave the same exact sermon. This time the reaction was not so positive. The congregation was quite frankly, puzzled. On the third Sunday, the young minister gave the same sermon for the third time. This time the congregation was incensed. What was wrong with this guy? The Board of Deacons held an emergency meeting in the parking lot of the church and the chair was instructed to confront the young minister about his sermons. In a private meeting, the chair asked the preacher, "Why have you preaching the same sermon three weeks in a row?" The preacher responded, "Because nobody has changed like I asked them to change the first time!"

While this story may first have been told to convict those who listen without responding, I hear a different lesson in the tale. I find the lessons in the actions of the young preacher. I learn that it does little good to tell people what they ought to do unless they are willing to listen. No matter how many times you tell someone something, if they do not take the message to their heart, if they do not understand who they truly need to be, they will not hear and they will not change.

I recall a controversy in a community near where I once lived. A large chain pharmacy wanted to open a big new store on a busy intersection in the heart of a local neighborhood. They promised that the pharmacy would have all of the latest technology and honor all known insurance coverage. They would be plenty of parking, something that is a problem in many of the community's smaller shops. They pointed out that the large store would improve the community's tax base. They said that the store would meet the demands of everyone who lived nearby. The developers of the pharmacy told the community planners that the store would make the area proud. But the planners didn't approve the store. It seemed that the people in the community were more concerned about the effect the big, new pharmacy would have upon the familiar

old stores already there. They did not trust the pharmacy's out-of-state lawyers and architects. No matter how good the store sounded, the people of the community just didn't hear any good news about it.

Perhaps God felt so ignored years ago. God had given the law to Moses and to the people of Israel. In the law was the most important part of God, the intention and purpose of God. The law contained the essence of how God's people were supposed to act and be. But the law was ignored. People did not hear the voice of God calling them to repent and to change. Piety and goodness was an obligation of the law but trying to create the respect of God through rules did not seem to work. A covenant based on external demands and written in stone was not a covenant to which people could identify.

So God decided to do something different to get people to change. Through the prophet Jeremiah God said, "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people." The covenant between God and humanity was no longer to be external-words on a stone tablet or rules on a page. What God is and what God desires for us is now to be part of us, written with familiarity, deep in our hearts.

I once read a story about a young woman who was involved in a serious accident. She was hospitalized in intensive care and her head injuries prevented her from recognizing anyone in her family. She would not open her eyes to see them and she did not respond at all to their voices. After about a week, her mother decided to try something new. She took some of her own perfume, the kind she had worn when her daughter was born, and sprayed it on a handkerchief. She then placed the cloth near her daughter's nose. Within a minute her daughter was squeezing her hand, responding to the new way her mother had chosen to reach out to her.

This passage from Jeremiah seems to explain a new way to comprehend God, indeed a new way for God to be. While we might be able to define God through an elaborate set of definitions, through a thorough set of rules, through the threat of judgment if we disobeyed those rules, and through complex ritual and discipline; we might not really know God. External or mind knowledge of God would no longer be enough. God wanted us to know God down to the core of our very being. And God wanted us to see ourselves as God sees us- not as failures and disappointments; but as forgiven and loved people full of great promise.

With Easter just a couple of weeks away we need to hear these words of the prophet, for they are words that define well the promise that is about to be ours through the death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. "They shall all know me, for the least of them to the greatest," says the Lord. "For I will forgive them of their failures, and remember their sin no more." God is not one of whom we need to be afraid and distant. God is one who comes to us, who forgives us, who desires us to do better, and who gives to us love which is to be shared with all.

One of my favorite Christian authors is Walter Wangerin, a Lutheran pastor from Indiana. He once described his experience of being a parent. His son Matthew was an early teenager and was going through an especially difficult time, rebelling against every value the family held dear. On more than one occasion the boy had been caught stealing comic books from a local store. After the latest incident, Walter was in despair. Believing he had run out of options, he resorted to something he had not done in years-

a spanking. He performed the action with deliberation, almost a ritual. But when he finished he was so ashamed of himself that he ran from the room crying. After pulling himself together, Walter went back into the room, grabbed his son, and hugged him long and hard. Nothing more was ever said about the incident. And Matthew never stole another thing.

Years later, Matthew was a grown man and he and his mother were reminiscing about the subject of the stolen comic books. Matthew said, "Do you know why I finally stopped stealing?" "Of course," his mother replied, "It was because Dad finally spanked you." "No," replied Matthew. "It wasn't the spanking at all. It was because Dad cried."

This is what I think the word of the prophet means for us today. The law will be written on our hearts. No longer will we know God by the threat of punishment or the fear of wrath. No longer will simply following all the rules make a difference in our relationship with our Creator. God wants to be real. God's love wants to be a part of us. God's grace is written in our hearts. That kind of God speaks to us, changes us, and makes all the difference in our lives.