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The Fruit of Kindness – The Spirit of Care

“Hard Heart, Caring Heart”

Matthew 25:34-40; Ezekiel 36:24-28; 2 Timothy 2:16-26

Matthew 25 is Jesus' vision of the final judgment, when the sheep will be separated from the goats. The sheep are recognized for what they have done for the “least of these who are members of my family”. The goats are recognized for what they have not done. We didn't read about them. The sheep are the ones who fed the hungry, slaked the thirst of the thirsty, welcomed the stranger and foreigner, clothed the naked, cared for the ill and visited the imprisoned. The sheep are the ones who have a Spirit of care, who are exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit of kindness.

Last week, I said kindness is most directly known by what we do and say for and to one another. Kindness and care are the activities that bring us into contact with Jesus in the world, and also make us more like Jesus Christ, how we live “in Christ”, as the disciples sought to do. And when we make contact with Christ, and by association, kindness and care, we are changed. Our lives are altered and we begin to see the world in a very different way. Kindness and care expressed to others and received by us cause our walls to come down, our barriers to dissolve, our hearts to be melted. We become a new person in the shadow of the fruit of kindness.

When those walls come down, especially the first time, that feeling of the heart melting, the previous understandings of the world dissolving and the perception of others and the world changing can be very powerful. My story of those walls coming down, my heart melting, happened in Puerto Vallarta. We went as a family when I was ( ). Our room at the hotel looked out over the ocean. Lizards climbed the walls. It was incredibly beautiful. The hotels that lined the beach were elegant. But this was before it was really built up. Now, as I understand it, you cannot see what I saw then, back in 197( ).

Early in the morning, the people selling their wares – jewelry, hats, sunglasses, snacks – started walking along the beach. They were very friendly. I was learning Spanish and they were helpful as I tried to communicate with them. One of them made it a point to find me every morning and talk with me. He was welcoming and kind and didn't try to sell me things, even though he was pretty aggressive with others along the beach. We couldn't swim because the rip tides were very strong and the waves were huge. I was 13 years old at the time, so I was keenly aware that beyond the wall to the left as I faced the ocean was the nudist beach.

But what really began to sink in was what was to my right. About 2/3s of a mile down the beach were some rocky cliffs that spilled down into the ocean. A couple long tubes shot out from the top of those cliffs and out of the tubes poured sewage. The sewage came from the village that was just beyond the hotels and shops of Puerto Vallarta. That village was made up of homes built of cardboard and tin sheets. They had dirt floors. The families washed their clothes in a muddy and polluted stream. The roads were not paved and I did not see any cars. There were chickens and donkeys and rain barrels to catch water that would be more clean than whatever they were drinking in that village.

Every morning, I woke up in Puerto Vallarta and we would go down to the restaurant, which had a buffet table set up with fresh fruit beautifully displayed. Then we would go out to the beach. One day, my parents asked for a cab and told the cab driver we wanted to go through the village. We drove through and it changed everything. Most kids go to Puerto Vallarta and come home with a tan and maybe some sort of stomach illness. I went to Puerto Vallarta and came home with what the Catholic liberation theologians call “a preferential option for the poor”. I was disturbed. The man who sold

jewelry was from the village beyond the hotels and paved roads. He would go home every night after wandering around the tourist areas of Puerto Vallarta. I don't know what he thought about. I don't know how he felt about the inequality and disparity which surrounded him. But with me, he expressed kindness and care. Perhaps I was one of the "least of these" because of what had been opened to me as a result of my encounter with the jewelry man on the beach of Puerto Vallarta.

Ezekiel 36:26 tells us what God will do to us: "**Ezekiel 36:26** A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh."

When did you have your God-given heart transplant? What did it feel like when your heart of stone turned to flesh? My guess is it happened when you had some experience which embodied the fruit of kindness and the Spirit of care. Most likely, someone cared for you and expressed an overwhelming kindness to you. Their action pointed you not to them, but to God and what God has done for us. Kindness always turns the heart of stone to a heart of flesh, because where kindness and care are present, God also is present. Where kindness and care are being expressed, especially with those who are in need, there is Christ.

Jesus' words about the sheep in the final judgment are definitive. If we want to know where Christ is in the world today, he is with the hungry, the thirsty, the vilified and rejected, the unclothed, the sick, the imprisoned. He is with the needy. The danger here, the danger I fell into with my experience in Puerto Vallarta, is a kind of paternal caretaking, wherein we get to define what the kindness looks like. Perhaps you believe yourself good at perceiving who is lying and who is working the system, so you take it upon yourself to determine the nature of the kindness you express. The thing of it is, though, in study after study it has been shown you and I are incapable of telling when someone is lying. Even with training, you might be slightly better than chance. And your ability is even worse if you think you are good at telling who is lying or not. Kindness given and care expressed are not and cannot be dependent on how you feel about the person seeking it. Kindness and care are defined by Jesus Christ, and because Christ defines it, we do not know when Jesus will be one of the hungry, thirsty, foreign, naked, sick, imprisoned ones.

We like our stony hearts. We want to decide the parameters of the distribution of the fruit of kindness and the boundaries of the Spirit of care God has given us. I am no different from anyone else in doing this. When people come into the church for help, I weigh what I am being told. I compare it to past experiences. I look them up on FaceBook and check to see if they are on probation or are recently released from prison. Then I make a decision based on who they are and how much money I have in the discretionary fund. Sometimes the answer is "No, we can't help". I like to think I am being a good steward of the church's resources and am acting on the responsibilities of kindness and care I have been given. But I have been ripped off. I have been taken advantage of. I look at these experiences and I see an entrenched system of scavenging, where people take advantage of the limited resources of the community. My heart turns to stone. And from the perspective of a stoney heart, I see welfare cheats, people who don't work who, if they only put as much energy into a real job, would make more money than going to community services. I see families who have taught their kids to live off of others. I see moms who apparently know nothing of how babies are formed, so they have more.

All of what I see, all of what I have just said, are the words of a heart of stone. All of those thoughts are the thoughts of goats. All of those judgments are the judgments of one who has more, who even IS more, determining what is best for those who have the least, who are LESS than me. The great thing about the spiritual life is that it is filled with little eddies and by-ways which allow me to justify these opinions and attitudes. But it also requires I don't read what is in front of me. God's sheep looks and

sees the bread of love which Christ has given, the water of life which flows from the side of Jesus, the Gentile and Other who have been welcomed into the promises of God, the clothes and armor of the Holy Spirit, the Resurrection in a killing illness and the freedom of God, “for where there is God, there is freedom”, in the bars and concrete floors of prison cells. The heart of flesh sees Christ.

So my question for us today is, “What turns your heart to stone? What allows you to reject what you have already been given by God, a heart of flesh, a new Spirit, a Spirit of care and the fruit of kindness?”

2 Timothy 2 gives some indicators of where we go back to our stone hearts, where we reject the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Paul wrote this letter to the young Timothy so he might be a better pastor to the church he has been sent to.

“Profane chatter” which rejects the Resurrection is one way to maintain a heart of stone. The reason for this is quite simple; without the Resurrection, how do we see Christ in others? Without the Resurrection, why would we even care to live into the promises of God and the fruits of the Holy Spirit?

“Youthful passions” flood the mind and cloud our ability to act on the fruit of kindness and the Spirit of care. By “youthful passions” Paul does not mean to denigrate youth. He means allowing things which require the energy of youth to motivate their expression – anger, lust, ambition and greed.

Paul says, “Have nothing to do with stupid and senseless controversies”. For me, it is so easy to get drawn into controversial arguments and discussions. I even like being controversial. But it clouds the ability to be kind. Those controversies lead only to quarrels. And quarrels are all about who is right. Paul is not concerned about being right (he knows he is right, so it is a non-issue); he is concerned about the church living out of the fruits of the Spirit and into the love and promise of God.

Instead, Paul tells Timothy to accept the heart of flesh God has given us in Christ. He tells Timothy to remember who the sheep are in the final judgment. He tells Timothy to “be kind to everyone”, to be a “patient teacher”, to treat those who are in opposition to his ministry with “gentleness”. In this way, those who are not a part of the way of Christ may begin to see possibilities of another way of being. They may become aware of their stoney hearts and desire a heart of flesh. They may desire the baptism of the Spirit which opens them to the fruit of kindness and the Spirit of care. Those who are not part of our way may very well be “the least of these among us”.

Many years ago, there was a little church. For many years, it was a thriving place. Children ran through the aisles after church. New families came through the doors. Elders welcomed the younger generation. The younger generation honored the older generation. The teachings of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit escaped the walls of the church and spilled out into the community and everyone knew the little church as a beacon and a light in a dark world.

Then the world changed. Everyone had a different idea of what had gone wrong. It was the young people today, who know nothing of manners and respect. The younger generation took offense because who else would they have learned such things from than the generation that was supposed to teach them. The pews of the little church became emptier. Children were but an echo. Numbers dwindled. Passion disappeared. The words from the pulpit fell flat and it seemed the Holy Spirit had better things to do.

The pastor found this distressing, to say the least. He worried about it and lay awake in the middle of the night. He remembered one of his pastors from when he was young, a minister who inspired his ministry often, so he decided to go visit him. The elder pastor lived in Boothbay Harbor, surrounded by other elder pastors. The younger pastor told him the story of his little church and asked for advice. The elder pastor had none to give. He said, "I have no idea what you can do to change what has happened. All I can say is that I have heard the Messiah lives among you."

On the drive back home, the younger pastor dwelt upon the cryptic words. Later that week, the council of the church met. They wanted to know what the elder minister had said. The pastor said, "Well, he really had no advice to give. But he said this weird thing at the end: I have heard the Messiah lives among you." The Council was quiet. What could it mean? Someone spoke up, "Does he mean that the Messiah *actually* is here?" Someone else said, "Well, if that is so, who could it be?" Another said, "Well, it couldn't be Ed. He is cantankerous and argumentative." Someone else said, "Yes, but Ed would give the shirt off his back for anyone in need." "Certainly, it couldn't be Renee. She just sits in the back and never says anything." "Yes, but Renee sat with my mother before she died and listened to everything she said. They cried together and laughed together." "Could it be Alison?" "Could it be Jamie?" "Could it be Ronald?"

Very quickly, the word got out that the Messiah was among the members of the little church. No one knew who it was. Everyone started treating one another with the fruit of kindness and the Spirit of care. A new sensibility and a new spirit came upon the little church. Their stoney exterior warmed and became much more fleshy and welcoming. Soon those who walked by and heard about the church heard of their new spirit and their new hearts. Soon everything changed and once again the church was thriving with kindness and care from wall to wall and it spilled out onto the streets of the community.

In Christ, God has given us a new heart. God has given us a heart of flesh. In the Holy Spirit, we have been given the fruit of kindness. In the least of these, Christ walks and lives. Be kind to everyone, for Christ may be with the person you least expect.

Amen.