

The Heart of the Matter

**Sermon notes for the sermon
given by Rev. Dr. Gregory Young
Presented on Sunday, February 13, 2011**

A few years ago I was shopping at Wal-Mart when I found myself standing next to a boy who looked to be of middle school age – probably in 7th or 8th grade. Out of nowhere he begins to pour out his heart to me. He started sharing with me how the other boys in school were constantly making fun of him and calling him names. As I listened to the boy I began to sense his pain. He had feelings of rejection; he felt he was being misunderstood; he was angry because he felt he was being judged by his peers who really did not know him; and he finally named what was happening.

It turned out that he was sitting at lunch with his best friend. As they were talking he rested his arm on the back of his friend's chair. Suddenly a group of boys saw the two sitting together and began to call them gay. Word spread throughout the school and by the end of the day everybody joined in the ridicule of these two best friends. The boy I was listening to in Wal-Mart was desperate. He was hurt as was his friend and they just didn't know what to do. I was able to direct him to persons who would be able to help and support both he and his friend as they tried to deal with the bullies at school.

The old saying just is not true – sticks and stones will break my bones but names will never hurt me. The boy that I met in Wal-Mart that day knew the reality that names hurt as much as or even more than broken bones – bones mend. Names, labels, gossip, lies can follow us a lifetime and can even change the path that one is travelling on in life. A girl goes on a date, enjoys seeing a movie with friends

and is suddenly labeled loose. A boy finds support and acceptance from his friend and they are called names that hurt.

And then there are times when the labels are true and successful careers come crashing to a halt. A picture on face book ends the career of a representative; scandal is revealed in the oval office ending the reputations of several presidents – Bill Clinton was not the first and will probably not be the last to face scandal as president. Names hurt, they cut deep. Sometimes we earn them by the lifestyle we live. Sometimes they are the result of misunderstanding or prejudice and can lead to violence and death.

In our Gospel reading today Jesus addresses this issue. The law was being used by the Pharisees to erect barriers between themselves and those who they felt were living outside of the Jewish law. They saw the law as something that was external; a rule book for governing individual action and behavior and a guide given by God to order the life of the faith community. Those who lived according to the letter of the law were seen as those who were acceptable. Those living outside the law were ridiculed, scandalized and ejected from the community of faith. Remember the story that Jesus told about the Pharisee and the tax collector? The prayer of the Pharisee went something like "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." The law of God was being used by the Pharisees to justify themselves at the expense of others. In fact, the Pharisees looked upon those who live outside of the law as lost souls who were unredeemable. They wrote them off as trash to be disposed of; not worthy of living the life that God had given to them; an abomination. Not only did this attitude govern how non-Jews were

treated, it also had a major impact on how Jewish men looked upon women – even their wives.

As Jesus observed the relationships between the Pharisees of his day and the rest of society, he saw people being destroyed as they were labeled and then ridiculed. We have to understand with the example of the Pharisee and tax collector that the Pharisee prayed his prayer so that all those around him could hear it, even the tax collector. Jesus took the extreme case of murder to help the community of disciples who were following him to see that thoughts and words can kill as easily as a weapon with similar results. The boy that I met in Wal-Mart that day was wounded and bleeding to death because of prejudice and misunderstanding. He had been cut off from the school community of peers and was deemed by them as being unacceptable, dirty, immoral... It was as though someone had stabbed him in the heart and he felt hopeless.

It is also no mistake that Jesus went on to address the issue of adultery since the Pharisees give no rights to women – the rules and regulations for adultery and divorce were written to be in the man's favor. The wife could not bring charges against her husband only the husband could do this. The result was that many husbands were in adulterous relationships and the wives were powerless to take action. Any wife whose husband was being intimate with another woman just had to live with the ridicule and shame of it being looked upon as one who was not good enough to keep her husband.

Jesus points to the spirit of God's law in an effort to hold both men and women accountable for their actions. He goes on to point out that infidelity begins in the heart and with the eye not with the action. Jesus holds all accountable, not just women, for infidelity.

In our Gospel reading today Jesus helps us to see the difference between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law. The letter of the law points to how we live in community with each other and the boundaries that we establish to help us define who we are as individuals and as a community. Jesus would affirm that the community of his disciples must embody the Ten Commandments as its moral code – we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. The Ten Commandments set the boundaries for our relationship with God and with one another. That is part of what it means to live as a follower of Jesus. Jesus, however, goes further than the letter of the law and gets to the heart of the matter, the spirit of the law. Followers of Jesus are called to live lives that are grounded in the very being of God; to embody an inward holiness that does not erect barriers of self-righteousness, but lives in total and complete communion with God and humanity. As Christians we are called to not only be justified people, with a faith that trusts in our redemption by Christ's sacrifice on the cross. We are called to be a sanctified people, having died to ourselves and now raised to new life in Jesus Christ.

The spirit of the law views all of us as sinners in desperate need of the saving grace of God. It sees all of us, good church people to those who sit on death row, as being in the same boat and in need of the same thing, the love of God. For Jesus, no one is exempt and those who in faith have begun the holy walk to salvation have a moral responsibility to those who have yet to join in that walk. That day in Wal-Mart I had a choice to make. I could have simply walked away from that boy as though I had never heard him. I would have thought him to be a nut case or something worse. Or, I could choose to listen and help. No one would have criticized me

for walking away, no one would have known – except me and God. You see, once you find yourself in the company of Jesus and part of the community of his living body, you can't just walk away. The old question finds a place here, am I my brother's keeper? The answer is yes, God calls me to care for my brother. My brother is defined as any human being who is in need.