

SERMON CCI Hearts of Stone Luke 11: 37-54

Some of you know that I grew up in a very conservative Baptist church. The Baptist group I grew up in believed they had the corner on the true Christian faith and were the only true churches around. All other so-called churches were just “religious societies.” To understand a bit of how conservative we were, we thought Southern Baptists were liberals!

One of the strengths of these churches, though, was teaching us to study the Bible and memorize scripture. To refine our skills, they held Sword drills. In a Sword drill the leader opens the Bible, the Sword of the Lord, and begins reading without telling where in the Bible they are reading from. The first person to stand up and begin reading along with the leader won that round of the drill. I was often the first one to stand. I was quite proud of this, but I didn’t show it, because, you know, I wanted to look more Christian than that.

I also followed the holiness rules of the church. I didn’t smoke, drink, dance, go to movies, or use swear words. But I did go to church 3 times a week, played piano for church, and gave part of my allowance as my own offering. That was pretty holy, right?

Then in my 20’s Rob and I went to an Intervarsity Christian Fellowship retreat through the college Rob was attending. College students from all kinds of churches were there, the speaker was excellent, and our hearts were stirred. But they had us do this activity that was really hard for me. Every day, they had us go off by ourselves and read a passage of scripture, answer some questions about what we had read and what it meant for living a life of faith, and then we were to spend the rest of the hour in prayer. Doing the bible stuff was easy, but pray for the rest of the hour? I prayed, then checked my watch- 5 minutes. Prayed some more- 6 minutes that time. What do I do now? I tried to pray some more... 5 more minutes passed and I was all prayed out! Then I watched a student near me with her head bowed in prayer and marveled that she could pray that long. Then I heard her pray. She really knew how to talk with God, as if God was right there with her. She knew how to pray in a way I had no idea about. My prayers tended to be lists of things I wanted God to do. Heal this person, protect that person. Her prayers were about real heart stuff, she spent time praising and loving God and asking God to make her strong in her faith. But wait a minute! I knew she belonged to one of those religious societies I had no respect for, yet she had a deep relationship with God. How could that be? My heart of prideful stone began to crumble that weekend, and my real faith journey began.

In today's story from Luke, Jesus had an interesting table conversation when he accepted a Pharisee's invitation to dinner. We remember that Pharisees were Jewish leaders of the day, very religious, very pious, very strict in living out the Jewish faith. If the Law called for a fast, they began their fast early and fasted late. If the Law called for a tithe, they gave 10 per cent **and** an offering and everyone knew it. That was another characteristic of the Pharisees: they portrayed themselves as better than others. They refused to associate with the so-called sinners around them.

Pharisees also followed the Traditions of the Elders which were rules that were even stricter than the Jewish Law. The Traditions of the Elders had extra rules for everything. Listen to some of the extra rules about not working on the Sabbath:

To carry a burden is forbidden. He who carries anything, whether it is in his right hand, or in his left hand, or in his bosom, or on his shoulder is guilty. But he who carries anything on the back of his hand, or with his foot, or with his mouth, or with his elbow, or with his ear, or with his hair, or with his money bag turned upside down, or between his money bag and his shirt, or in the fold of his shirt, or in his shoe, or in his sandal is not guilty, because he does not carry it in the usual way of carrying it.

Did that clarify how to keep the Sabbath holy? Or did it give the Pharisees loop holes to get around not working on the Sabbath but still looking holy?

Jesus often got in trouble because he refused to follow the Traditions of the Elders. Like in today's scripture reading. Jesus got in trouble because he didn't wash his hands before the meal. This wasn't the handwashing our mothers told us to do before meals. The Tradition of the Elders had a special "holy" way to wash the hands before a meal, and Jesus didn't observe it. When Jesus was asked about it, he became angry because they took such great care to wash the outside, their hands, their feet, and their bodies, but their hearts remained unclean and hardened like stone with pride. All their fancy handwashing didn't do anything to clean their hearts which was much more important to God.

Jesus said a lot of things that night about what it's like to have what I call Pharisee-itis:

- They tithed everything, even down to the spices in their kitchens! Such generosity to God, but they treated others like dirt.
- They took the best seats in the synagogue, in the very front row, not so they could see better, but so they could **be seen** better and be honored!

- They looked so clean and holy on the outside, yet they were like hidden gravestones people stumbled over- filled with death on the inside!

They seemed to do all the right things, but on the inside, their hearts were hard and filled with pride. They tended to focus on small details and miss the point. They gave of their wealth to help the poor, but then looked down on the very people who needed help. Their hands were kept ritually clean, and used it as an excuse not to help their neighbor! “I can’t help him, my hands are clean.” Their hearts were so hard that they were blind to the fact that the very Son of God was there at the table. They called Jesus a sinner! **SLIDE** They missed the point of Micah 6:8-

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

Jesus had no patience for such hypocrisy. The Pharisees’ response is no surprise. After Jesus left, they began to lay traps to trip him up so they could totally discredit Jesus. Their hearts of stone would eventually lead them to put Jesus to death.

What would a Pharisee be like today? Would they look different from us? I began with a story from my life, a time when my religious pride blinded me to my Pharisee-itis. And I’m not fully cured from my Pharisee-it is yet. It’s so easy to be a Pharisee. Aren’t there times when we practice our faith, not out of love for God, but because of what people might think if we didn’t? Do we ever look down on people whose way of living faith is different than ours? Do we criticize people over little stuff? Christians have some great ways of making mountains out of molehills. Do we ever make a flash judgment of someone and treat them according to our judgment without even giving them a chance?

I commend this congregation for your generosity in helping the people living in Tent City 4; you’re generous with money and even taking cookies to them “over there.” But let’s dig deeper for a moment. What if they showed up here on Sunday mornings, left their stuff stacked in the entryway, came in and sat down on **our** nice chairs with their scruffy clothes, sang **our** songs with off key voices, and ate all **our** refreshments? Would you invite them to sit next to you? Be open to their questions about faith, open to their problems? What if they broke the unwritten rule of “no swearing” in church? Honestly, would we gladly welcome them as one of us, or do we prefer to help them down at Tent City 4?

The story I am about to tell uses some strong language but its point is one we need to hear. Kids, I am going to say a word I don't normally use because it is not a word Jesus wants us to use. So, when you hear me say it, don't copy me. I am using it to make a point. American Baptist minister and sociologist Tony Campolo once described the greatest criticism he ever received while speaking in a church. Tony Campolo is known for his concern for the poor and people who are rejected and ignored on the margins of society. Standing before the piously-dressed, religious-sounding congregation, Campolo announced, "Tonight in West Africa, 6000 people will die of starvation and you don't give a shit." The people gasped, but Campolo continued, "and right now you're more concerned about the fact that I said shit in your pulpit than you are about those 6000 people who will die." Perhaps we are too. We can all have the hard heart of a Pharisee.

Once a heart has turned to stone, it can be difficult to soften it because we can feel so righteous the way we are. I did as I grew up. Sometimes it takes a painful or humbling experience to turn our heart around. We have the opportunity today to once again lay a stone at the foot of the cross, this time asking God to take our hearts of stone and give us hearts of flesh. To ask God to heal our Pharisee-itis and give us hearts filled with his love. For all people.

And, if you have never turned your heart fully toward Jesus as Savior, you can turn today. As you bring your stone forward, confess your sin and receive God's forgiveness. God is a forgiving God who gives second chances at a new life. If you turn your life around today, please let me know. I want to celebrate your new life in Christ.

PRAYER: Heavenly Father, we are your creation, made in your image, and loved by You. But we confess that we have places in our hearts that are as hard as stone, places we don't want you to meddle with, or call us to task on. Father, you promised long ago you would take your people's hearts of stone and give us hearts of flesh. Our hearts need your softening today, our hearts need your forgiveness, our hearts need to be made new. Change our hearts, O God, we pray. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it... We're all prone to wander, go our own way, like a sheep on the highway. I'm sure it made sense to this sheep to go his own way at first, maybe even made him feel free- until the first car came careening down the road. Before we sing those last few words again, let's take a few moments and silently admit where we've wandered from God's ways.