

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the First Sunday after Christmas, December 28, 2008
Lessons: Jeremiah 17:7-11, Psalm 139:23-24, and Luke 2:22-35

HOPE FOR THE HUMAN HEART

We all need assurances, especially in hard times, but the problem with assurances (especially in hard times) is that they can sound so sure, so certain that if we will only do this and do that and think in the right way, then everything will work out just fine. If life were that simple, who would have troubles?

Many find problems easy to solve, as long as they are other people's problems. We seem by nature to be ready advice-givers, but I have come to believe our advice is often a combination of caring for the other person and self-defense. Because we care, the person's problem troubles us (to some degree), and we would like to see it solved. Being troubled by someone else's problem, however, adds to our own stress levels; to the extent we let ourselves care, we take on a new stress for ourselves. Since most people already have high stress levels, we try to minimize this new stress by solving the problem – the other person's problem. Unfortunately, the offer of easy advice suggests the problem is easy to solve, which is seldom true. So, the receiver of our advice feels diminished by it's, "Why don't you (just) do this or that?" approach. We may know, intellectually, that what the person seeks and needs is understanding, not advice, but the time and effort required to understand and empathize add to our own stress levels, and so we protect ourselves from the added stress by taking the easy way out, which is giving advice.

As my psychologist friends use the term, *sympathy* is easier to offer people in distress than *empathy*. I think of sympathy as packets of understanding and comfort. We recognize someone's pain or distress and so we offer packets of sympathy, gestures that say, "I see you are hurting, and I care; I feel bad for you." That's what sympathy does: it feels bad *for* the other person who is hurting. Empathy goes further by letting down its guard enough to feel bad, not *for*, but *with* the other person. Empathy lowers its own protection level to share some of the distress. For obvious reasons, it would not be good for a person to overdo empathy, to become like an emotional sponge. So, those same psychologist friends of mine speak of the "empathic wall" we build to protect ourselves from the emotions of other people. We can't afford to share all of the emotions we encounter in a day. We need to maintain boundaries of our own, but if we build our empathic walls too high and too thick, then we come to have no regard for the feelings of other people, neither empathy nor sympathy, not even pity. Then we harden and become cruel. It is dangerous to allow

ourselves too much empathy with others. It is even more dangerous to allow ourselves too little.

Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.
See if there is any hurtful way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.

That prayer is for godliness, but what kind? Does it seek virtue or healing – the healing of emotions and relationships? The standard rendering in English is “wicked,” asking God to “see if there is any wicked way in me,” but the Hebrew says “hurtful” – “See if there is any hurtful way in me” – which I find more healing and more hopeful for life.

Virtue always seems to me a private matter of keeping myself apart from others, my morals untainted by their compromises with sin and my faith untroubled by their questions, fears, or doubts. Virtue is something to protect, to guard, to keep for myself. But the cure for hurtful ways is compassion, which is something to open up, give, and share.

Authoritarian Christianity seeks to impose virtue upon people, by force of will and sometimes even law. It regulates behavior, rewarding the good and punishing the bad. Compassion it keeps in short supply and tends to regard as coddling. Pain, it thinks, builds character, and so it keeps a supply of cruelties in a bin labeled, “for their own good.” Grace? Authoritarian Christianity, loving virtue, allows grace to serve only as a ticket of admission through the door, into the sanctuary, but not really into the community, the fellowship. Grace it sees as a chance to repent, to cast off bad behavior and put on virtue, but grace as a way of life and an agent of healing it scorns as coddling. Sinners, it thinks, need correction not understanding. Children, it believes, need to be beaten – if not with sticks, then with words. Love is to be withheld so it can be measured out as approval for good behavior, for virtue.

Simeon foretells Jesus’ rejection, and Jesus is indeed rejected, specifically by the virtuous people. Instead of preaching at the sinners, he shares life with them. He hangs around with them and welcomes them into the company of his disciples. For Jesus, grace is not a second chance to learn virtue. No, grace is the thing, the goal, the desired outcome. Grace is the mind-set of those who love God, the bond of the believers’ community, the means for healing the human heart, and the very nature of hearts in the process of healing.

But what is grace, other than the least understood word in the Christian vocabulary? Grace is love that does not ask to be earned but only to be accepted and responded to. What we fail to realize is the transforming power of accepting God’s love and the love of people who offer it. Grace is not just a second chance at achieving virtue but the essence of life in

the truly human community. That's what Jesus Christ calls us to become: a truly human community.

I have a problem with the term "unconditional love," not so much for what it means as for what it can be taken to mean. Does unconditional love mean I'm not supposed to care how the other person responds? That can't be right. Does a parent not care how the child thinks, speaks, treats other children, and, yes, behaves? Is it okay for the child to be selfish, cruel, and heartless? What I think unconditional love really means is that we do not withhold love and give it out in small doses as approval, which is not the same as love at all. With grace, the other person does not have to measure up to our standards in order to be loved. She or he is loved, and that bond holds even when the behavior is hurtful.

Martin Luther tried to beat the wickedness out of himself and so achieve virtue. Saul of Tarsus, who later became the apostle Paul, tried to beat the wickedness out of other people and so impose virtue upon the community of faith. Both men gave up their quest for virtue when they were overcome by God's grace and learned, with great struggle, that life is much more about having compassion than getting it right. The true opposite of godly is heartless.

The heart is devious above all else;
it is perverse—who can understand it?

God can, and even more hopefully, God cares to understand the human heart, mind, and will. What makes us respond as we do to life and other people? What past hurts make us defensive, what resentments impel us to push away the very friendship or love we seek and then despise ourselves later?

Our boxer dog used to stiffen his neck, making it impossible to move him on a leash without hurting him, and he had a strong neck. What makes us stiffen our necks and refuse to be led where we may even want to go? Why do we persist in hurtful ways when we hate the results we achieve by them? God's grace is healing for the human heart, and that's what we are seeking together as a church. That's what we need: not advice, not virtue, but healing for the heart. That's also what God gives us to offer people as Christ's church: not standards we'll accept people if they live up to, while we pretend to live up to them ourselves, but grace – understanding, respect, and compassion that heal the heart and restore the human community. Let heart-healing be our prayer and our priority as we enter a new year in faith.

See if there is any hurtful way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.

Amen.