

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
28th Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 15, 2006

Intentions of the Heart

Mark 10:17-31; Hebrews 4:12-16

Isn't this a beautiful time of year!
We've had some gloriously crisp, clear, bright and sunny days.
Yesterday was just fabulous, particularly in the morning,
 while I was working on this sermon.
There was shaft of sunlight streaming through the window,
 as I enjoyed its brilliance
 I began to reflect on the nature of light,
 and the way it gives us knowledge and clarity
 about the world in which we live.

Consider the light given off by a flickering candle at night.
In this kind of dim light, a room may look fairly clean and orderly.
But, wait until morning,
 when the rising sun sends radiant beams through the windows,
 brilliant shafts of light that reflect every particle of dust
 that hangs in the air.

I remember the wonder in the voice of my son
 the first time he noticed this effect.
 “What are all of those little specks floating in the air?”
Every particle, every stray fiber, every texture becomes visible.
Then, consider if we were looking through a powerful magnifying glass.
We would see thousands – or millions? – of microscopic creatures,
 crawling everywhere, over everything.
In fact, if we could see that clearly and closely,
 it would probably be all we could do to stay there in the room.ⁱ
We would be most uncomfortable!

Such is the effect of this passage from the Gospel of Mark
 when we stand in the brightness of it's light.
It makes us most uncomfortable!
But just like that shaft of brilliant morning sunlight,
 that's the effect on our lives when we draw near to Jesus.
He helps us to see clearly, and sometimes perhaps
 more clearly than we would like.

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Today, I'd like us to consider this text
not so much for what it says about wealth or poverty,
though it certainly is about that;
and not so much for what it says about good stewardship
and generosity,
though it certainly is about that, too;
but for what it says about this man's relationship to Jesus,
and thus about our relationship to Jesus,
and about our experience of trying to follow Jesus,
and draw closer and closer to him.

I think Mark intends for us to see this man as a very good man.
He is genuinely interested in being a good man, and living a good life,
and he is striving to be worthy of entrance into
the eternal life of God's kingdom.

But as good as this man is,
he apparently still feels that something is lacking.
He has climbed the highest mountains of his faith,
he has run, he has crawled
he has scaled every wall, only to be with God,
but he still hasn't found what he's looking for.ⁱⁱ

And so he comes to Jesus, standing solidly on years of careful obedience,
and he asks him,

Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

He gets so close to Jesus that the light almost burns.
Jesus begins by dismissing this man's first assumption about eternal life.
It's not about being good.
In Jesus' presence he sees plainly that he is not good;
that no one is good compared to God;
that no one is good except God;
and that it is useless to try to depend on our goodness to bring eternal life.
Even the extraordinarily profound goodness
of keeping all the commandments all of one's life.
We may remove the dust bunnies from the corners of our soul,
but we are still crawling with microscopic critters we can't even see.
To this man's credit,
he already has a sense that his goodness is not good enough,
because he has come seeking that which he hasn't found.

Standing in the presence of Jesus,
this man's vague sense of lack is laid bare and shown for what it is.

Jesus has a way of pointing out the bald reality of our human condition.
Not because he dislikes us, or is disgusted by us, or is angry at us,
but because he loves us.

Mark tells us Jesus looked at the man, *and loved him!*

This *look* that Jesus gives is a look that we have seen elsewhere
in the gospel story.

When Jesus heals a blind man,

Mark says the man *looked intently and his sight was restored
and he saw everything clearly.*

And later, when Peter denies Jesus

in the courtyard of the High Priest

one of the servant-girls sees Peter warming himself,

and *she stares at him* (the same look)

and she sees the truth about who he is.

The *look* that Jesus gives this man cuts through every façade,
through every layer of false image,

and sees into the dark and dusty corners of the heart.

Jesus, the Word of God made flesh,

does just what the letter to the Hebrews says the Word can do:

The word of God is living and active,

sharper than any two-edged sword,

piercing until it divides soul from spirit, bone from marrow;

it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

And before him no creature is hidden

but all are naked and laid bare

to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

If you weren't uncomfortable before, that should do the trick!

You're in church with 200 other people – and you're naked!

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Our hearts are a mysterious realm,

and judging the intentions of the heart

is an exercise fraught with self-deception and confusion.

John Calvin was fond of pointing out that

because of the sinful condition of the human race

our motives are never pure.

Even our best deeds,

our most holy and righteous endeavors,

our shining moments and our finest hours,

are hopelessly tainted with sin.

Our brokenness goes to the core.

Our motives – that is, the intentions of our hearts – are *always mixed*.

It is the curse of a fallen race.

This means that it is very difficult to see our own hearts clearly;
and we *surely* are even less able to see clearly into the hearts of others.
This cuts both ways:

It means that we cannot defend the purity of our motives,
suggesting that we are somehow uncorrupted by sin.
It also means that even when our motives are apparently evil,
there might still be some good desire, some good longing
at work in our hearts.

That means when we examine our own hearts,
or when we consider the hearts of others,
we must be both skeptical, and generous;
we must be on our guard against evil,
but also give the benefit of the doubt.

That is why it is a dangerous business
to judge the motives and intentions of a brother or sister in Christ,
or any other person;
to claim to know the intentions of another's heart
is to go beyond what's humanly possible.

Only God knows the intentions of the heart.
Only God can truly know our thoughts.

And there is nothing more humbling,
nothing that will make us more honest,
nothing that will bring us to more intentional self-awareness
than to know that God can read
the thoughts and intentions of our hearts – like a book.

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So we come to Jesus, because we are searching, and longing,
and because we still haven't found what we're looking for.
Do you come to Jesus because
as you examine your heart, you feel you are lacking something?
Do you sense that there is still more to this faith
than you have as yet discovered?
Are you drawn somehow to go deeper,
to live more fully, to trust more profoundly?
Perhaps you are like the man who comes to Jesus and asks,
using the only frame of reference you have available to you,
Lord, I've done all I know to do. What do I do now?
What must I do to inherit eternal life?

Well, this text give us a fair warning.
If you want to remain as you are;
if you don't want to be bothered with the hard work of transformation;
if you'd rather not have to change anything about yourself;
if you'd rather just remain as comfortable as possible;
then don't get near Jesus.

When you see him coming toward you – go quickly the other way.
Because if you ask Jesus to show you the way of the kingdom
he is going to ask you to do something hard.

Not because he likes to see people suffer,
but because he knows you *are* suffering and *will* suffer
until you find your rest in God.

Not because he wants you to be poor and powerless,
but because he sees that you are still enslaved
by powers to great for you to overcome on your own.

Jesus will ask you to do something hard, to take some leap of faith,
because he sees your heart, and he loves you.

Perhaps there is a change you need to make in your work situation.
Or perhaps your family is stuck in a dysfunction
that requires you to change your behavior in a significant way
for the sake of the long-term health of the family.

It could be your decision to join the church.
or to accept the call to serve the church
as an Elder or a Deacon.

Perhaps you are estranged from someone;
you've both hurt each other, and seethed in anger,
but the only way forward is for you to reach out
and begin the work of reconciliation.

Whatever you are being called to do,
Jesus longs for you to know the joy of abundant life and love
in the kingdom of God.

And he loves you too much to let you remain as you are.
He knows the way to get past your defenses
calling you out of the shallow waters and out into the deep.

The depths to which we need to go are so far over our heads
that we cannot go there on our own.

To do what we need to do is impossible for us.

Like trying to fit a camel through the eye of a needle.

For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.

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The good news is this:

Though our hearts may be a confused muddle of mixed motives.
Though our best, most faithful deeds are crammed with corruption.
Though our strength of heart may fail us at the crucial moment,
and though our leap of faith
may look more like a loss of footing,
Jesus is willing to stick with us.
Jesus, the Son of God, is our Great High Priest
who has passed through the heavens.
He is able to sympathize with our weaknesses,
because in every respect he has been tested as we are,
yet without sin.

Jesus, who lays our lives bare by the light of his Word,
is also the one who bears us on his back
as we boldly approach the throne of God
where we will find grace abundant,
and more than enough mercy
to meet our deepest need.

Thanks be to God!
Amen.

ⁱ Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart: The Contemplative Dimension of the Gospel* (Rockport, Mass./Shaftesbury, Dorset: Element, 1991), p.94

ⁱⁱ Bono, "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For", *The Joshua Tree*, 1987.