

Heart Disease
Mark 7:1-2, 5-9, 14-15, 20-23
August 27, 2006

Heart disease is the leading cause of death in the United States. One of the most common forms of heart disease is coronary artery disease, which involves the progressive narrowing of the arteries that nourish the heart muscle. The narrowing is due to a buildup of fatty plaque along the artery walls. If the arteries are seriously blocked, blood flow to the heart may be inadequate, causing chest pain, shortness of breath, or even a heart attack.

In this morning's scripture, Jesus seems to be troubled by heart disease, although it is a different form of heart disease. Jesus diagnoses a spiritual disease of the heart that has symptoms such as obscenities, theft, murder, greed, mean looks, slander, arrogance, and foolishness. Physical heart disease primarily impacts the individual. Jesus is deeply concerned about spiritual heart disease because it impacts all people. As with coronary artery disease, the channel through which love flows from our hearts to others can become clogged by rules, regulations, expectations, and prejudices.

The Pharisees question why Jesus' disciples fail to wash their hands before eating. They follow a long-time tradition of washing hands before eating because it is symbolic of cleansing oneself before God. They are disturbed by Jesus' careless attention to ritual and purity regulations.

Jesus frequently allows his disciples to break human rules when they prevent the higher command of God's love from being fulfilled. He recognizes that sometimes tradition blocks the free flow of love from the heart. His disciples are traveling missionaries with no place to wash their hands. Instead of scolding them for disobeying the rules, God's law of love would say, "Welcome, come sit at the table, dirty hands and all. It is more important that you be fed and nourished."

Sometimes we get so hung up on traditions, rules, prejudice, and expectations that they hinder or destroy our relationships with others. We can become hard-hearted, self-centered, cut off from God and God's desire given the circumstances. Our own expectations block the flow of God's Spirit and love through our hearts. The opposite of love is indifference, apathy, lack of care or concern. When we stop caring about people because they don't meet our standards, we miss who they really are. We set up barriers that prevent us from appreciating our differences and building community.

The gospel calls us to examine our rules and expectations. Keep what is useful, but discard what is no longer useful, those regulations that hinder rather than encourage the free flow of God's love. All human traditions, even those inspired by God, are subject to change. When we discover that our human rules have been contrary to God's greater law of love, we had best make some changes.

We may even discover that some long-held traditions are rather foolish in origin. The signs in one apartment building parking lot read, "Speed limit—11 m.p.h." When Ralph spotted the groundskeeper, he asked, "How come 11 m.p.h? Why not 10 m.p.h.?" He replied, "An eleven is easier to paint."

You probably heard about one family's tradition of cutting the ends off the Christmas ham. A friend asked a woman why she always cut the ham at the ends. "That's the way my mother always did it." Then she asked her mother, who replied, "That's the way my mother always did it." When she asked her mother, the grandmother, she said, "That's the only way I could get it to fit in the pan."

Sometimes our traditions and expectations need to change, especially if they will allow more freedom for God's love to flow freely. This is true for our individual lives, for we all hold certain standards near and dear to our hearts. Oftentimes our biases can deny us rich opportunities for relationships. Sometimes the traditions of the church need to change. Rituals and attitudes need to be evaluated, revised, or abandoned if they hinder the love of God from freely flowing. In recent years the church has had to wrestle with unwritten rules about the presence and participation of children in worship, proper dress for worship, and appropriate music for worship. It is said that the seven last words of a dying church are, "But we've always done it that way!"

We hear Jesus' teaching that sometimes our human traditions are in conflict with the will and way of God. Rules make religion safe, predictable, easy, and comfortable. But faith is messy, surprising, difficult, and uncomfortable. People of faith live not by rules and regulations, but rather by the Spirit of the living God.

In the winter of 1988, nuns of the Missionaries of Charity were walking through the snow in the South Bronx looking for an abandoned building that they might convert into a homeless shelter. Mother Teresa, head of the order, had agreed on a plan with Mayor Ed Koch after visiting him in the hospital several years earlier.

The nuns found two fire-gutted buildings on 148th Street, and the city of New York offered the buildings to the mission at one dollar each. The

Missionaries of Charity set aside \$500,000 for reconstruction. The plan was to create a facility that would provide temporary care for 64 homeless men. The buildings would provide a communal setting that included a dining room and kitchen on the first floor, a lounge on the second floor and small dormitory rooms on the third and fourth floors. The members of the order, in addition to taking a vow of poverty, avoid the routine use of modern conveniences. As a result, the facility would have no dishwashers or other appliances, and laundry would be done by hand. For New York City, the proposed homeless facility was a godsend.

Then Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity encountered the bureaucracy of the City. For a year and half, the nuns, wanting only to live lives of service, found themselves traveling from hearing room to hearing room, presenting the details of the project. In September 1989, the city finally approved the plan and the Missionaries of Charity began repairing the fire-damaged buildings.

Then, after almost two years, the nuns were told that according to New York's building code, every new or renovated multistory building must have an elevator. The Missionaries of Charity explained that because of their beliefs they would never use the elevator, which would also add \$100,000 to the project. The nuns were told that the law could not be waived even if the elevator would not be used.

Mother Teresa gave up. She did not want to devote that much extra money to something that would not really help the poor. According to her representative, "The Sisters felt they could use the money much more usefully for soup and sandwiches." In a polite letter to the city expressing their regrets, the Missionaries of Charity noted that the episode "served to educate us about the law and its many complexities."¹

It is hard to go against city hall, but Christians are called to follow a higher law, the law of love. Of course, many laws and rules are designed for the protection and safety of all, but the intricacies can sometimes frustrate the pursuit of love. This is by no means permission to break any law. It is a call to examine those internal regulations and rules that may hinder fulfillment of the two greatest laws: the love of God and the love of neighbor. Sometimes we are called to advocate for change in public policy, religious rituals, customs and traditions that violate the law of love.

A recent issue of *The Christian Century* contains two articles reflecting on our nation's current debate over immigration policy. One article is an interview with a human rights lawyer who serves as the president of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, Ralston Deffenbaugh. He reminds us of the migrant experience of God's people and

the gospel call to show empathy, compassion and welcome to newcomers in our midst (Exod. 23; Matt. 25). His agency suggests that immigration policy be based on four principles: uniting families, protecting human rights and worker rights, bringing undocumented people out of the shadows, and providing a path to permanence for newcomers. The vast majority of people who migrate to the United States come for reasons of family, work or freedom – to unite with loved ones, to take up employment or to seek refuge from persecution.²

The second article tells the poignant story of Maria Durand de Perez, a Mexican woman who died last summer in the border town of San Ysidro, California, at the astonishing age of 111, one of the oldest people alive on earth. Maria was born in 1893 in a small town in central Mexico. She married at the age of 18 and moved to California in 1911. Her husband worked in the Los Angeles public works department for almost 20 years, but he lost his job when the Depression hit in 1929. The next year Raul and Maria returned to Mexico. It was not an easy decision, for their two children were U.S. citizens by virtue of birth. After completing his education, their son, Frankie, returned to San Diego, married, and had children. Maria's daughter, Angela, chose to marry a Mexican national and remain in Mexico, living in Tijuana to be closer to Frankie and his family. For the last 50 years of her life, Maria was the matriarch of a binational family, with family members frequently crossing the border for visits. Maria crossed the line using a "local passport," issued by the INS to Mexican citizens who could prove their permanent residence in Mexico.

By 1998, both Maria and her daughter Angela were widowed. They moved in with Angela's daughter in San Ysidro so that family members could share in their care. They made occasional day trips to Tijuana until Maria's local passport expired in 2002. After years of crossing the border legally, the family then had to make the decision to allow 108-year old Maria to become an "illegal alien" in order to live with her family caregivers who were American citizens. She was neither a "wetback" nor a "border jumper" but a "visa overstayer."³ Maria's family chose to break the law in order to obey the law of love, a love which required them to care for this oldest family member with the dignity and grace that civil laws would not allow.

Sometimes traditions, laws, rules, and regulations can block the free flow of love from the human heart. Jesus calls us to be mindful of clogged arteries that prohibit the love of God and love of neighbor from flowing. As friends of Jesus, may we dare to ask God to cleanse our hearts of all that blocks God's love from streaming through us. May we open our hearts to be

filled to the brim with divine love, faith, and joy. May we not be doomed by diseases of the spiritual heart, but live and love with healthy, joyful hearts.

¹ James Emery White, *Rethinking the Church: A Challenge to Creative Redesign in an Age of Transition* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1997), pp. 92-93. Retrieved from *Homiletics Online* August 25, 2006.

² Ralston Deffenbaugh, "System failure: The ethics of immigration reform," *Christian Century*, August 8, 2006, pp. 22-25.

³ John Fanestil, "Why Maria crossed over: One family's binational life," *Christian Century*, August 8, 2006, pp. 18-21.

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