

A Calloused Heart, Ash Wednesday, February 22, 2023 Acts 28:16-31

When Jana and I first returned to Minnesota after our seminary years in Kentucky, we bought a house that had an unfinished lower level. For the better part of a year, we worked on finishing that lower level. And by the way, one of us insisted that we call it the basement, while the other persisted in calling it the lower level. I'll leave it to you to guess which of us called it the basement.

My hands quickly began to show the signs of bending sheet metal ducts, stripping wire insulation, pulling out old fiberglass insulation, and cutting and hanging sheetrock. If you've worked with your hands on these kinds of projects, then you know exactly what I mean. I started to accumulate the small cuts, scrapes, cracks, and slivers that happen when your hands aren't used to doing much other than holding a coffee cup, typing at a keyboard, and turning the steering wheel of a car. I knew that after a while, say another month of crawling over and under duct work, my hands would begin to develop calluses, and I wouldn't be so bothered by the fiberglass slivers. In fact, I suspected that when I got to that point, I probably wouldn't feel much of anything with my hands! That's when you know that you've been spending too much time with home improvement projects and not enough time under the blue sky!

The apostle Paul knew all about callused hands. He was a tentmaker, and he continued working with his hands throughout his life of ministry, possibly even during his final years of imprisonment in Rome. But in the final passage of the book of Acts, Paul quotes the prophet Isaiah, not referring to calloused hands, but to calloused hearts instead. So tonight, as we prepare to enter this season of confession and repentance, we'll consider the condition of the calloused heart: What are its symptoms? What are its causes? What treatment is available? If you have a calloused heart tonight, I'm going to repeat Paul's challenge to you to "see with your eyes, hear with your ears, and understand with your heart" the good news about Jesus Christ.

Within a couple of weeks after that same move back to Minnesota, I had set up our new bank account and was startled to receive a notice of a deposit correction from the

bank. It seems that a recent deposit slip had been submitted for a total of \$28,614.29, whereas only \$28,607.29 had been received. Instead of being disappointed that the error had resulted in a subtraction of \$7 from our account, I was elated, and immediately called the bank to inquire as to who our mysterious benefactor was. You see, neither I nor my wife had made any deposits anywhere near that large.

Unfortunately, I was informed, there was no mysterious \$28,000 deposit- a bank teller had made an error in adding the \$28,000. However, there was still a net error of \$7 dollars that would be debited against my account. Now I wasn't so happy. Unable to reconcile the bank's records with mine, I asked for a copy of the deposit slip and the checks involved, certain that the bank had made a second error. When I received the documentation I had asked for, my blood pressure started to rise again! There it was, the evidence of the bank's second error. I was dumfounded: How could the same bank that sent me this evidence of a bank error also insist that I was the one who had made a mistake when I filled out the deposit slip?

I immediately picked up the telephone to set things straight and left a heavily pointed message on the voice mail of the bank's research department. I was still fuming when the banker called me back and talked me through the paper trail. And that's when it happened.

Holding the same piece of paper, looking at the same numbers, I saw something I had completely overlooked before. The same check had been recorded twice on the deposit slip, a product of my error, not the bank's. I sheepishly apologized, thanked the banker, and hung up, all the time wondering at my complete inability to see my error once I had sped to my conviction that the bank was out to steal my money.

And there you have it: the first symptom of a calloused heart, eyes that are "ever seeing but never perceiving." It happens to us all the time. We stubbornly cling to a mistaken belief, some hurt from our past, a nagging self-doubt, and our ability to see becomes impaired. Maybe you don't really believe that anyone could really love you, so you simply can't see the simple, thoughtful acts of love given all around you. Maybe you

think that even God is incapable of loving you, and so you fail to see his fingerprints in the thousands of acts of grace and mercy that bathe you every day. Or maybe, you read the good news about Jesus Christ and just can't believe it, or you can't believe that it's good news for you. Revelation that is intended to bring about repentance and healing is short-circuited when a calloused heart blinds our eyes.

Our vision is not the only faculty we lose with a calloused heart. A second symptom of a calloused heart, according to Isaiah, is "hearing but never understanding." I'm convinced this happens all the time in conversation, especially at times when we have strong emotional involvement. Anyone who has lived in a close human relationship has inevitably experienced an argument. Tempers flare, words fly, and very little true listening happens. We're either too busy getting ready for our rebuttal or we're far too certain that we're right. Perhaps both. Sure, if challenged, we can parrot the words back, can't we? "I am TOO listening!" you say! But if we're honest, all too often our pride gives us a calloused heart that prevents us from really understanding each other.

What, and who, are you hearing, but not understanding? Is it your husband or wife? Your "significant other?" Your mother or your father? Your son or your daughter? Your brother or your sister? Is it someone older or younger than you are? Is it someone you work with but would rather not? Is it someone with a different skin color or someone who speaks a different language? Is it something you've heard in a sermon?

How about that inner voice of the Holy Spirit, speaking to you through your conscience or through some bible verse that comes to mind? When God offers us revelation by hearing, a calloused heart blocks our way to repentance by closing our mind. If a calloused heart leads to seeing eyes that don't perceive and hearing ears that don't understand, I think we can all admit that we have had our share of heart calluses. But where do these calluses come from?

The source of a callused heart today is the same as it was in the days of Isaiah. In the record of his commissioning vision from which this quotation in the book of Acts is taken, the prophet Isaiah cried out before the throne of God, "Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a

man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty!” Most of us don’t have prophetic visions. But in a very real way, every believer stands before the throne of God right now by virtue of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit and the intercession of Christ Jesus at the right hand of God the Father. And the bad news is that our condition is no better than that of Isaiah. We are all sinful people, living among sinful people. Pride, arrogance, selfishness, hate, lust, greed- the whole gamut of human sin- that’s what causes calluses of the heart. And we’re all afflicted. Every time we speak out in anger, turn away from someone in need, or disregard God’s word, we betray our wayward and hardened natures.

How about you? Which are the thickest calluses on your heart that prevent you from perceiving and understanding? Why is it that you profess faith in Christ and his Gospel, and yet consistently turn away from Christ-likeness?

I can’t answer those questions for you. But even as we bear our hearts before God’s altar tonight, God is offering us a cure for our callused hearts. It’s nothing new, really, but it can be profoundly difficult for those of us who are far too certain of ourselves and far too eager to prove that we’re right. John and Jesus said it this way, “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.”

Turn away from the source of your callused heart today. Begin the journey right now. You don’t have to carry your burden yourself. God’s Spirit will help, if only you’ll turn to God and ask for help.

God reveals himself to us in many ways, but always his revelation is intended to draw us closer to him, to call us to repentance so that we can enjoy the healing grace of his Holy Spirit and restored community with each other. Tonight, at the beginning of Lent, we’ll allow ourselves to linger a while in the ugliness of our sin, receiving not the assurance of our forgiveness at the Lord’s Table, but instead the ashes of our mortality and sin.

A calloused heart is a heart of rebellion, a heart that turns away from God’s revelation, a heart that neither perceives nor understands God’s will, a heart that divides

community. God is offering you a chance to turn around and claim a new heart. How are you going to respond?



Buffalo United Methodist Church



...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!

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