

WHAT COMES FIRST...THE HEART OR THE MIND? (MT 21:23-32)

Sermon given by the Rev. Corinne Hodges
Sunday, September 28, 2008, St. John of the Cross

The sermon was preached without notes. The following is the preacher's reflection on the gospel, done in preparation for Sunday's message.

Jesus is entering the temple for the last time and right off the bat, he is confronted by the temple officials with a question about his authority. Rather than being thrown by the question, he stumps the stumpers and responds with his own question to them. "Did the baptism of John come from heaven or was it of human origin?" The authorities are in quite a quandary over how to answer. If they say heaven, they cannot explain why they did not believe or follow John. If they say the power was from humans, they will upset the crowd. They clearly do not want to lose face and so they avoid giving an answer. Instead of contemplating what lies at the heart of the question (their faith), they keep up their appearances of being cool and in control. They remain hard at heart, set in their ways and will not make themselves open and vulnerable to responding to the truth.

Jesus compares these religious leaders to their cultural but also spiritual opposites. The prostitutes and sinners had no authority or power, yet they listened to John, heard the truth and changed their hearts, minds and ways. As a result, they were healed and transformed. The authorities were not.

Can you recall a time in your life when you had a change of heart that really mattered? Before I was a priest or even an Episcopalian, before I was active as a minister of care in the Roman Catholic, I had a change of heart that changed my life. It was a time in my life when, just like the religious officials in our gospel story, I was together on the outside. Happily married, I had a good job, family, friends, health, yet inside I was lost. Faithwise, something was missing. I hungered for God and my daily life seemed to yield little purpose and worth.

One Sunday I went to church as usual, but this time as I entered the sanctuary, I was confronted by a woman. She explained that there was Anointing of the Sick that

day and asked if I wanted to be anointed. I instantly said, “Oh, no. Thank you.” I mean I was healthy, nothing was wrong with me, I did not need that! That was something for other people, people who were really sick, troubled or had real problems.

Well I sat down in the pew and tried to focus and pray, but there was this nagging voice. I could feel it coming from deep inside of me. That voice told me to go back, to tell the lady I was wrong and that, yes, I did want to receive the healing. I was so surprised and I tried to resist, but I could feel my heart melting, warming up to the idea. I knew I’d be making myself vulnerable by opening myself up to whatever would unfold, but that voice did not let up. So I had a change of heart, went returned to the lady, put on a nametag identifying me as one who wanted to receive, and I prayed.

When it came time for the anointing, I can say that what I experienced was God’s incredible love, forgiveness and welcoming. I knew that God had wanted me to do this. And when many people, people I did not even know, formed a circle around me and shook my hand and embraced me at the sign of peace, I knew something special was happening. God was getting through, transforming me and call me home. This experience has left a mark on my life. It called me to greater faith and involvement in the church. As Ezekiel says in our OT reading today, it gave me a new heart.

What comes first, a change of heart or a change of mind? In our gospel reading today there is the story of the two brothers. The first says he will not go out to work in the vineyard, then does. The second responds yes, he will work, and then does not. What made them change? My guess is that the first son felt God nudging at his heart, just like I did. He knew what he had to do. The second son however, probably let his mind rule.

Changing our hearts and minds to do the right thing, the thing God calls us to, takes incredible strength—it often involves admitting we were wrong, putting our pride aside and doing something we said we would or would not do.

God has something to renew in each one of us. How do we know when to have a change of heart and mind? Listen to your conscience. That still small voice of God inside you will pull on your heartstrings and tell you what is good and right and true.