

Living from Your Heart

Part 2: The Heart of a Hero

Based on Mark 3:1-6

January 14, 2007

One of the most stirring speeches in recent film was delivered by William Wallace in the movie *Braveheart*. Wallace was the hero who delivered the Scots from the ruthless English king, Edward the Longshanks. In this particular scene from the movie, the massive and well-trained English forces are on one side of a huge field. On the other side, there's a rag-tag bunch of Scottish soldiers who are quickly losing heart and starting to run away. Wallace arrives in his blue war paint and gives this stirring speech:

"Sons of Scotland ... you have come to fight as free men and free men you are." After Wallace encourages them to keep fighting he ends his speech by saying, "And dying in your beds, many years from now, would you be willing to trade all the days from this day to come back here and tell our enemies that they may take our lives, but they'll never take our freedom." At the end of the speech the men start cheering wildly. Then Wallace's friend asks, "Fine speech. Now what are you going to do?" To which Wallace replies, "I'm going to pick a fight."

In a similar manner, in our Gospel story this morning, Jesus is clearly picking a fight. Of course for Jesus it isn't just a fight for political freedom. In this passage Jesus is fighting to free our hearts. He's fighting for the heart of what Christians call the Gospel – the good news of what God is doing and can do in our lives. So let's walk through this story of Jesus and let God give us a vision for the Gospel.

Fighting for Our Freedom – Mark 3:1-6. First, a little background to the story: this is the final story in a string of five stories in which Jesus will get in trouble – and the trouble is going to brew into a major storm of conflict. Let me give you two examples: In Mark chapter 2 verse 7, after Jesus claims to have the authority to forgive sins, they complain, "Why does this fellow talk like this? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Then in 2:16 after Jesus attended a dinner party for a bunch of outcasts and sinners, the religious leaders indignantly snort, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

Did you notice how often Jesus was in trouble? There's a biblical truth here: you can't live from your heart and avoid suffering. Living from your heart, trusting God with all your heart, fighting for others with your heart – this will propel you into a world of suffering and you will get hurt. But it's also the only path to true joy and freedom. (Martin Luther King, JR.).

Now we arrive at chapter 3 and tensions are starting to boil. Jesus isn't trying to be a rule-breaker; he's simply turning our lives back to the original purposes of God: a spirituality of the heart that produces changed and restored lives. The religious leaders are on edge because they have lost their heart. As a result, their spiritual lives are based

on external rules and regulations that have very little to do with the heart. And they don't like Jesus. So this scene bristles with tension.

So what does Jesus do? He picks a fight. But it's not just a fight for the sake of fighting. This is a fight for redemption, a fight for a man's life. Here's how the fight started: It begins with a damaged man (See verse 1). Furthermore, we also know that the current religious leaders have made specific rules and regulations about what could and could not be done on the Sabbath, the day of worship. For instance, you could perform work on the Sabbath – and healing was work – only if it was a matter of life or death. Clearly, Jesus could have avoided the conflict and still heal the man the next day.

That's why we read in verse 2 “that they watched him closely to see if he would heal on the Sabbath.” They have Jesus under a magnifying glass and they're trying to dig up dirt on him. So Jesus turns to the man with the withered hand and says, “Stand up in front of everyone.” Imagine the tension – first of all, the tension for this damaged man. How would you feel if you had to display the broken pieces of your life before everyone? Uncomfortable. Exposed. Embarrassed. Ashamed. The man is clearly defective in a culture that valued non-defective people.

This is an intense moment. Will Jesus heal the man or not? Once again, Jesus could have healed the man a few hours later – quietly, respectably, “legally.” But instead he chooses to do it right now – on the Sabbath, in your face, as we might say. But before he heals the man, Jesus drills them with a question: “Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil; to save life or to kill?” They are utterly silent. Then in verse 5 – “Jesus looked around at them...” This was an uncomfortable “look.”¹ Then Jesus heals the man and in verse 6 as the story ends, the religious and civic leaders want to kill Jesus.

Why is Jesus so angry? Why do the leaders want to kill Jesus? Why does he insist on picking a fight over this issue? The short answer is this: something huge is at stake here. For Jesus the main question cuts to the core of the human heart: What is the Gospel? How do we find spiritual freedom? For Jesus, the Gospel is a gigantic, hopeful, thrilling, all-embracing, life-changing story of our restoration in and through Jesus Christ. In the person of Jesus Christ, through his life and his death on the cross for us and the power of his resurrection, a new creation is dawning. The old creation is broken and sinful and falling apart – just as our lives are broken and sinful and falling apart. But in Christ and through Christ, God the Son is saving, reaching, embracing, forgiving and then restoring our broken and disabled lives. This small story of the restoration of a man's withered hand is just a foretaste, a sneak preview, of this grander, larger, thrilling, life-changing story of how God in Christ is restoring our lives back to God.

A few months ago a friend of mine who serves with the U.S. Army in Afghanistan wrote to me and said, “*Lately, redemption has been on my mind. I was reading the best car magazine ever, Sport Compact Car. I have this obsession with rice rockets, little import cars with insanely large turbos and modified engines. Flipping through my magazines I*

¹ This isn't the first time Jesus looked around at someone. Mark has a good deal to say about the “looks” of Jesus (see 3:34; 5:37; 9:8; 10:23; 11:11).

am filled with hope and dreams of my own project car. But my favorite stories are ones where the cars have been salvaged from rust and ruin, and made into show-winning tuners. It reminds me of Jesus. Where others see a rusty, broken vehicle, a true tuner will see hidden potential. And when Jesus sees me he sees more than just a broken man; he sees something glorious. Redemption is like working on a project car. Jesus is the mechanic and I am the busted junker that needs repairing.”

How does God bring about this restoration? How does God save us and redeem us and restore our broken lives. This passage presents two basic paths: (1) the way of religion and (2) the way of the Gospel of God’s grace in Jesus Christ. Let me give a very short definition of these two options. Religion comes in many different shapes and sizes, but in one way or another it tells us, “If I obey, if I perform, if I can do it good enough, if I can follow the rules, I will be accepted before God.” The Gospel says, “Because I am loved by God in and through Jesus Christ, therefore I will obey.” And only the second path leads to true freedom.

The Path of Religion. Let’s look deeper at the religious path in this story. Once again, religion is all about trying harder and keeping the rules and striving for moral perfection or being born into the right family and spending your whole life jumping through the right hoops. In religion I am safe because I’m better than others – or at least most people. And it does not transform the human heart on a deep level. Religion can only touch the surface. Sadly, many of our churches are filled with religion. We look good, we act good and sometimes we follow the rules and regulations but our hearts are dead.

In religion the rules and the Law, which start out good, always end up strangling us. That’s what was happening in this story. The Law about the Sabbath was good. God said take one day out of seven and rest. Let creation restore itself; allow time and space for your body and mind and spirit to be restored. That’s beautiful. But as always happens in religion, we ruin the beauty of God’s plan. So in Jesus’ time people started adding things to the Law. They came up with 39 categories of activities that could not be performed on the Sabbath – you can’t do this and you can’t do that. Everyone had to carry around their little rulebooks. And people became so uptight about keeping the rules that they missed the point. So, for instance, in this story in Mark 3 we meet a man who desperately needs restoration. He needs healing – not just for his broken hand, but more fundamentally, for his broken heart. And then we meet another man, Jesus, God in the flesh, who can restore his damaged hand. And it’s the Sabbath – why, what could be more beautiful than healing his withered hand right now? Uh, uh. No, no, Jesus. That’s against the rules. The essence of the rules is the rules. The essence of the Gospel and God is restoration of wrecked human lives. Every time we take the path of religion we always miss the point and stifle God’s Spirit.

For instance, a few years ago our entire family took a trip to my home state of MN. As we waited for takeoff in JFK, I went to the Starbucks kiosk to buy coffee and get a cup of water. We were thirsty and I just wanted one large glass of water and the entire family would share it. “O, no sir, I can’t give you a large water. That’s against the rules. I can only give you this teeny cup” – and then she held up a cup the size of a thimble. I said,

“But we’re all really thirsty and one tiny glass won’t be enough.” “Sorry those are the rules – no large waters; only these teeny thimble-sized glasses.” I thought for a minute and then asked, “How many thimble-sized glasses can we have?” “O, we don’t have any rules about that.” “Okay,” I said, “then could you fill me up about fifteen of the small glasses.” She was stunned. No one had ever asked her for so many glasses. But she did it because it wasn’t against the rules. You see, when we make rules and keeping the law the point, we always wind up constricting our lives.

The Path of the Gospel. Then there is the way of The Gospel, the way of Jesus. It’s not just a different religion; it spells the end of religion and the beginning of new life, full redemption, total restoration of the human person. In religion I obey and therefore I am accepted before God; but the Gospel says that I am accepted and therefore I obey. The Gospel says that I’m safe when I admit that I’m a sinner – as a matter of fact, I’m the worst sinner on the planet because I know (better than I know any other human heart) how deceptive my heart can be.

Of course we need rules and regulations and guidelines. Every community needs to live by regulations and order and guidelines otherwise we just end up in chaos. But in religion I follow or try to follow the Law or the moral code because if I get it right it assures me that I’m doing okay. But that almost always leads to one or two disastrous alternatives: self-righteousness or guilt and anxiety. In the Gospel the Law serves a radically different purpose: it exists to humble me. Why? It humbles me because as I stand before the Law of God, which is always a reflection of God’s perfect love and holiness, I realize that I continually fall short of God’s righteous standards.

From the first church I served in northern Minnesota I’ll never forget a raw young Christian named Ray. Ray came from a severely broken home and his own past included years of alcoholism. He constantly struggled to grasp the basics of the Christian life. When I preached a sermon on loving our enemies, Ray came up to me with a long list of people he hated. “Are you kidding,” he said, “I can’t forgive all these people. This is too much.” On another occasion I talked about rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep. “Are you kidding,” he said again, “are you saying that I have to be happy for the guy who got the promotion over me? This is too much.” When I talked about God’s grace being available to anyone, Ray met me at the door again and said, “Okay, now you have definitely gone too far. This Jesus stuff is just plain crazy! Honestly, I have all kinds of people I can’t stand to be with. This is just too hard for me.”

I told Ray not to be discouraged. I said, “I think you’re anger and bewilderment is a good sign. It means that you’re starting to get the truth that living for Jesus really is impossible. Sadly, most of us good church people have forgotten that simple truth, but Ray, maybe you can help us remember that it’s impossible to keep God’s law.”

But once the Law humbles us, once we see that the Law was given not to lead towards self-righteousness or smug security in our obedience nor to crush us with our failure; once we see that it’s a gift in which God says, “Okay, now that you know you can’t fulfill the requirements of the Law, now that you know that you’re not better than anyone else,

now that you know that you constantly fail to live up to the beauty of holiness, how about if I meet you at the cross of Jesus where there is forgiveness and hope and a new creation waiting for you?" You see, the Gospel offers radical, liberating spiritual freedom (see Galatians 5:1 and Romans 8:15). That's the key to living from our hearts with joy and love and freedom and hope: it's found in the freedom of the Gospel.

Now this freedom, this restoration that God offers us in Jesus, is so glorious, so audacious and bold and borders on sheer arrogance. To say, "There is no condemnation for me; I am a son or daughter of God; Christ has set me free and I am truly free ..." borders on arrogance and psychological delusion. Who are you to say such things? And you just turn around to Jesus and say, "My Big Brother, Jesus told me."

The Results of Religion and Faith in Jesus. In this story we clearly see what religion does to the human heart. It shrivels it. It constricts it. It hardens it. Their hearts are hard like a stone. In the Bible, there's something far worse than having a disabled body; it's having a hard heart. Over and over again the Bible warns us about having a hard or a stubborn heart. (See Ephesians 4:18). A hardened heart does not bring restoration to anyone. And that's why Jesus is angry. See verse 5 – "he looked at them in anger, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts." Jesus is angry because this issue strikes at the heart of the Gospel, the heart of our full restoration. After all, they were the religious leaders. They were the Bible-thumpers. They were the ones who were trying to get it right before God – and they really were trying. But they totally missed it. And in the meantime other people were also being kept out of the Kingdom of God. So Jesus is angry. But notice something else: he isn't just angry; he's also deeply saddened. Notice the rest of verse 5 – "deeply distressed by their hardness of heart."

So in Mark 3, as this scene heats up, all eyes are on Jesus. Will he fight for this man's restoration? Will he back down and choose a safe path, the path of religion? Or will Jesus choose the big story of redemption and restoration? Will Jesus put a stake in the ground and say, "No, this is too important. This is worth a fight. It's more than one withered hand; this is the Gospel." Will Jesus fight for and win our total restoration? Or will he just fill the air with more religious advice? He fights for restoration. What was Jesus doing on the cross? He was fighting for you and for me. He was fighting for our freedom and our restoration.

Notice what happens at the end. Read verse 6. The Pharisees were the conservative religious leaders of their day. The Herodians were the supporters of Herod, the leader of Rome. They were the liberals and progressives of the day. Normally, the Herodians and the Pharisees at best ignored each other. For the most part they lived in suspicion and hostility. But now they agree on one thing: Jesus has to go. Jesus is not only a menace and a pest; he's a threat to stability and normalcy. He's dangerous. How do you know if you're still stuck in religion? Here's a clue: you look at Jesus and say, "Yeah, he's okay. I suppose he helps me out every once in a while." True and authentic Christian faith says, "Jesus blew my world apart – and he's still blowing my world apart. I have nothing to stand on anymore – except for Jesus. But that's all I need – and that's all I ever needed. And it's enough. It's good and sufficient."

Bothers and sisters, let me leave us with two questions:

1. Do you know the freedom of Jesus Christ this morning?
2. Will you join Jesus our Lord, our Savior, the One who fought for and won our freedom, will you join Him as we fight for the freedom of others?