

**Knowing Our Father's Love Softens Our Hearts to Hear the Truth
Based on Mark 8:11-21, David Jahnke, 6/21/15**

We begin again today with more wrangling between Jesus and the Pharisees. They came to Jesus and asked for a sign that he was from God. Jesus had just multiplied the loaves a second time and I am guessing the Pharisees were not there and had only heard about it. And the Pharisees are not bad people— they are basically upright and moral folk. But a spirit of mistrust and doubt and defensiveness had gotten into them and this eventually led to murder.

We saw the same spirit of mistrust leading to hatred in the attack on God's children in the church in South Carolina. And while a sick individual did this, a spirit of mistrust and hatred of black people fed this young man. Jesus said beware the yeast of the Pharisees and Herodians—King Herod's followers— beware a spirit of self-righteousness in religion combining with cold political power to harden hearts and keep Jesus' Kingdom vision from becoming a reality.

So we condemn with every fiber of our being, this murder of our brothers and sisters and the yeast of racism that led to it. But the danger is to circle the wagons of quote-unquote "us" and take the battle to quote-unquote "them."

That is how the upright Pharisees handled the wrongdoer; especially the wrongdoer who was gaining power— i.e. Jesus. They were scheming-- "Let's put this arrogant son of a dog in his place. Let's prove to the crowds that he is not only a lawbreaker but an impostor."

But when they ask Jesus for a sign, Jesus refuses to play their game and he gets in a boat with the disciples and he warns them about being wary of the yeast of the Pharisees and King Herod. The disciples themselves had messed up by not bringing any of the extra bread with them. So they got defensive and mumbled something to each other about how Jesus must be upset because they forgot the bread.

Jesus wants to talk about the yeast— the evil spirit pervading hearts. But they think he is blaming them for something. So don't think I am blaming you or white people in general. It is the yeast of self-righteousness and racism and political apathy and mistrust that needs addressing.

So Jesus has a lesson for the disciples. To paraphrase him-- “Who cares about the bread? Are your hearts hardened too? These religious and political leaders do not have the same vision of God as I do. They want to withhold the abundance of my Father’s love and grace from those who need it the most!”

“If you want to talk about bread, fine! How much bread was left over after I fed the 5000? Yes...12 basketfuls. How much after I fed the 4000? 7 basketfuls! Don’t you get it? I have come to feed everyone! Even those Herodians and Pharisees who are out to get me-- if they would only come to the Table of God’s Mercy without tricks and schemes!”

The problem is how tempting it is to be a Pharisee or Herodian. We all build walls of defense around our hearts and lives because we have seen terrible things happen to others and have had terrible things happen to us. This leads us to doubt God’s providence— we doubt his power and love combining to care for the world. We are afraid and we do not want to take the risks that God calls his people to.

I heard a story about two prison inmates, one white and one black who were from two different generations but became friends in prison. The young black man named Jessie never really knew his father and his mother lost custody of him when he was four or five. His grandma who raised him “never really took to me.” Jessie’s heart was hardened by an absent father and losing his mother and by his grandma and other people jumping on him when he made mistakes. And he ended up hurting someone and went to jail for it.

The elderly Daniel’s situation was very different. He had been a successful businessman. He spoke of his own arrogance; his sense of getting whatever he wanted whenever he wanted it. But one night, he did not get what he wants from a woman he was fooling around with and her forced his will upon her. These are or at least were both bad people.

One day, Daniel spoke to Jessie about how he lost his family, and Jessie’s heart was moved and he wondered to himself whether they might become family. They started talking more about personal stuff and then one day, out of the blue, the younger Jessie suddenly called Daniel dad.

And rather than being taken aback, it seemed quite natural to both of them. And after talking about it over months, Daniel and Jessie decided to become father and son legally through adoption.

Hardened hearts are missing an abundance of Love in their lives. They are missing grace in their lives. They are missing the knowledge that they have been adopted by their Father in heaven who will love and care for them for all eternity. What David and Jessie found is God's Spirit of love and mercy and reconciliation; what they did in becoming family is the work of the church.

I hesitated to bring this up after the terrible event Wednesday. But whenever such a cold wind blows through our nation, we can either let that wind get in to us and make our hearts harder; or we can remember the Love of our Father in heaven for all His children. We can either double-down in judgment and defense and attack or we can double-down in bringing Our Father's love to the world.

We can build up walls of defense which clarify who is with and for us and who is against us. We can reinforce walls of culture, class, race, religion; walls that keep the righteous safe from the wicked. This is the way of the Pharisee and the Zealot and it is understandable and tempting. But it is not Jesus' Way.

Jesus had just fed thousands-- sinners and righteous alike; there was no checklist asking people what they believed or what they had done. And when it was all done, there were basketfuls of bread left over for those who had not come to the meal.

The disciples had seen and heard all of this but they had forgotten the leftover bread. They had not come to fully understand the depths of God's love and mercy and power to redeem. And they would not understand that God's compassion could cover all the world's sins until the cross and resurrection.

This brought to mind a friend of mine who was diagnosed with cancer at 25. She was lost like the rest of us-- partying in her teens and early twenties. But she always held strong to her faith in God while we generally made fun of her for it whenever the subject came up.

She battled the brain tumor for a couple of years but died at 27. At her memorial service, her pastor spoke of visits to her in her last couple of weeks. Tracey kept insisting that everything was all right and that she was not afraid for herself in the least. Because she knew and felt that God was near. Despite all she was going through, she kept saying that with God, "It is grace upon grace upon grace."

Grace in the beginning, grace throughout our days, grace in the end. In the beginning, the grace of a Father who understands the ignorance of His child and loves him anyway. Grace in the middle when that child has been taught something over and over but keeps forgetting. Grace in the end when we are finally purified completely and welcomed into the Kingdom with no walls, because wickedness will be no more.

Until then, we build prison walls that constrain the wicked and thus protect. But even those walls are penetrated by the grace and truth of God which speaks first and foremost and throughout the prison minister's lessons, "I love you, my child and I always will" and which also names and rebukes and offers forgiveness for sin which thus transforms and redeems the sinner.

So which way will we follow? Excluding and thus condemning the wicked to their own devices? And when that spreads like a yeast into our safe-havens, will we go a step further and seek to destroy them? Or will the church once again become apostles of Christ Jesus—sent out into the world to engage the wicked with love that gently speaks the truth; seeking to convert the lost to the Way of eternal Life? The choice is stark with one bringing perdition and Hell and the other salvation and Heaven. May we choose wisely and be brave in carrying out the right choice; through the one who bore all of our sins on the cross that we might know and receive eternal life. And God's people say...

