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“Harden not your hearts” (Psalm 95).

*Jer 7:23-28; Psalm 95; Luke 11:14-23*

A word often used to describe political conflict is the highly charged term “demonize.” People retreat into their information silos and media camps. They see one another through the gun sights as either willfully ignorant or in bad faith. This divides families, friends and neighbors, gets broad brushed on different regions of the country, city and rural, coastal and middle, north and south. It effectively shuts down civil discourse, destroys trust and hardens hearts. Overcoming this paralysis is more than a rational process and requires genuine healing to restart human relations.

The Gospels describe a culture in which people saw good and bad spirits at work in every aspect of their lives, causing health or illness, curses or blessings, empowering certain people, places and objects as holy or evil, safe or dangerous. Jesus moved within that culture imbued with a graciousness that apparently dispelled fear and restored order. Miracles of healing and liberation from mental and spiritual bondage flowed from his words and actions, creating a public sensation. People felt the presence of God in Jesus, freeing them, healing them and reconciling them with one another.

Yet, this happy occurrence was not without controversy. An underlying power struggle was evident to the leaders of the synagogues and their liaisons in Jerusalem, who sent inquisitors to Galilee to observe the growing popularity of this

new charismatic teacher from hill country Nazareth. Rather than exult in Jesus' "good news" about God's outpouring of mercy and love, they hardened their minds and hearts against him to the point of saying he was in league with Satan. They demonized him.

Jesus easily exposed the illogic of their charge that he was driving out Satan by the power of Satan, quoting the adage: "A house divided against itself falls." But the battlelines have been drawn, and from this point on, Jesus' ministry of preaching and healing was discounted as an attack on religion and religious authority. The more gracious Jesus became, the more hateful his enemies became, until they concluded that only death would stop him and his movement.

Hardness of heart was a life-threatening condition for the Hebrews wandering the desert with Moses. They forgot that they had been rescued from slavery in Egypt, complained constantly about the hardships of life in the Sinai, even indulged idolatry to a golden calf to get a god more responsive to their wants. The Prophet Jeremiah rebuked his generation for their ingratitude and refusal to listen to God. So, Jesus found scriptural precedent for the way people treated him. His message was too good to be true. They refused to take yes for an answer. Jesus was an agent of Satan. It was better for him to die than for the status quo to be disturbed.

Hardness of heart is a life-threatening condition for the American democracy. Without dialogue, compromise and mutual respect despite our ideological and political differences, the American experiment will be history.

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