

HEART HEALTH

Sermon at FCCOE August 29, 2012

“ . . . and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine HEART and all thy soul and all thy might. . . ”

Deuteronomy 6:45

“ . . . that Christ may dwell in your HEART by faith . . . ”

Ephesians 3:17

Good morning. You may recognize our first text from three weeks ago. It was cited by our guest preacher Jim Pocock. It's from a famous biblical prayer called the "Shema," which in Hebrew means "Listen" or "Hear." Devout Jews have been saying this prayer twice a day, morning and evening, for thousands of years. When it's recited at the annual Passover supper, many Jews make a habit of covering their eyes at the first part, as a gesture of reverence for speaking the name of God.

Today, however, I'd like to focus on the second part of the prayer. That's the charge to "love the Lord thy God," as our first and highest religious duty. It may strike you as clear enough. But it raises the question of how we love God. The verse mentions three dimensions of that love – "with all our HEART and all our SOUL and all our MIGHT."

Why does HEART come first? And what exactly is meant by HEART?

This became a point of interest two years ago, when I retired from my teaching career and within weeks developed heart trouble. That, by the way, was my original title for this talk: Heart Trouble. Later it seemed a bit negative, so I changed it to Heart Health. The Bible speaks of both, but I think the balance of interest should be not to the disease, but the remedy. Not to the problem, but the solution.

So, I'd first like to talk about the biblical sense of "heart," and how it differs from the modern sense. Second, we'll look at some famous verses that shed light on that biblical meaning.

Does anyone here have health issues with their physical heart? I do. What laid me low two years ago was called a heart "incident." It wasn't the classic heart attack, the blocked artery, the myocardial infarction. In the US, there are three million heart attacks a year. That is why heart disease still beats cancer as the number one cause of death in this country. In having heart disease, I joined a very large club. However, I was lucky. My disorder was not a blocked artery, but a sudden decrease in the pulse rate. It's called bradycardia, which literally means "slow heart rate."

Do you want to hear the details? Of course not. You're probably thinking, this is what comes of letting old men near the pulpit. The first thing they talk about is their health problems. True enough, when old men when they get together, that's about 90% of the conversation. So, naturally, I'm going to tell you the details. But don't worry, I have a point.

As background, my father died relatively early, at the age of 67. I must admit, as I entered my sixties, the age at which he died loomed large in my mind. I had a superstitious fear that I would die at the

same age. Some of you know that I became, in midlife, an avid runner. I'd like to say it was for the glory of sport. In fact, I was just hoping to prolong my life, and get further into it than my father had.

I thought I had succeeded when I reached my 68th birthday. It was September 21, 2019. I spent it in my hometown of Riverside, California, at the 50th reunion of my high school graduation. The event began with a fancy brunch at the best hotel in town. I figured I had finally got past the age of 67 and was free and clear.

Halfway through the brunch, I collapsed and vomited on the marble floor. The staff were wonderful, putting me in a wheelchair. My old best friend insisted on driving me to the local hospital. At the ER, they put electrodes on me. We watched the monitor as it showed my heart rate dropping from 60 to 50 to 40 to 30. Just like the medical shows on TV, the doctors grew excited. If the heart rate falls to 20, it's near death. They injected me with something to boost it and recommended I get a pacemaker.

Two days later, I had one implanted. That involved some of you, and I want to take this chance to give thanks for your prayers. Statistically, the implanting of a pacemaker is not a dangerous operation. Still, I had never had people poking into my heart. I was quite anxious until I reached the operating room. Suddenly, the anxiety vanished. In my Christian life, I've had few experiences that verge on the supernatural. But that felt like one of them, and I think the prayers of FCCOE helped make the operation a success.

The upshot – I survived. And it made me very attuned to the human heart, both in its literal medical sense, and in the metaphorical use of the word. The English language is full of “heart” idioms, and many come from the Bible. They say that when you learn a new vocabulary term, you suddenly see it everywhere. So it seemed with mention of the heart. I heard it in common speech – “soft-hearted,” “hard-hearted,” “she’s all heart,” “a heartless thing to do,” “the heart of the matter,” “no heart for the fight,” “If I only had a heart . . .” There’s no end to its colloquial uses and you could probably come up with a score of different ones.

What’s interesting is that they’re all based on incorrect anatomy. The ancients, and not just the Hebrews, wondered about the location in the human body of the organ responsible for thinking, feeling, judging, desiring. Now we know that it’s the brain. But back then, the heart seemed a better candidate. First, it was more in the center of the body. Second, they knew it was a pump to send blood throughout the body, an action that was intuitively understandable, like water running through pipes. Last, when the heart stopped, so did human life.

Still, if the Hebrews got the physiology wrong, I’d say they got the psychology right. There had to be something within the human body that governed thought, emotions and desire. It was the center of knowledge, of the will, and of the affections. It’s what we might now call “consciousness.”

Other words: the personality, the inner life, the self, the essence of our being. After my heart trouble, I grew aware of the heart as a physical organ, but also of the heart as a metaphor, and as a major concern of biblical wisdom. What can scripture teach us about heart health? The physical part is fairly clear – eat broccoli, get exercise, avoid stress. But the metaphorical aspect is richer and more nuanced. The focus is on transformation. Let’s look at a few references to the heart in the Old Testament.

The inclination of the human heart is evil from youth. Genesis 8:21

This isn't very flattering, but it sheds light on that moral aspect of the heart, its function in shaping our desires and choices for good or ill. Do you know who's speaking? It's God himself, to Noah, after he sent the Flood that killed every human being on earth, aside from Noah and his family. That event was preceded by the long decline in human behavior since Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden. What's interesting is the God joins this judgment to a vow never again to destroy his creatures. It's as if he recognizes our tendency to sin yet has decided to approach it in a different way.

God voices the idea that there's something inherently wrong in human nature, indeed, in this world. That sense of wrongness may be the origin of the religious impulse. People wonder, why can't we act the way we want? Why can't we avoid hurting others and ourselves? We know we have good intentions; we know we have the potential for loving and generous behavior. Yet we know too that our hearts are inconsistent. Like Paul, we feel torment over the paradox in our behavior. "That which I would do, I do not. And that which I would not do, that I do. . . Oh, wretch that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death?"

Well, God will. That's the implication of his statement. Yes, the inclination of our heart is evil. Yet by staying in relationship to God, our hearts can be transformed.

A verse about King David gives more clues to this process.

Man looks upon the outward appearance, but God looks upon the heart. – 1 Samuel 16:7

Here's the context. The prophet Samuel was looking for a replacement for the first king of Israel, Saul. Why? Saul certainly looked the part of a king. He was tall, vigorous, confident. Yet he lacked character and disobeyed Samuel about sacrificing to God. This led Samuel to look elsewhere and meet the eight sons of Jesse. Samuel assumed that the first-born son, Eliab, would be God's choice. But he felt a check as he reviewed both Eliab and his six younger brothers. At last, he turned to the eighth son, David, the youngest and probably the smallest. David tended sheep and spent most of his time in quiet solitude.

The real difference, though? David was a man after God's heart. Samuel may have sensed his other talents, as a warrior, an administrator, a poet and musician. David's great strengths, however, proved to be balanced by great weaknesses. He also became a warlord, an adulterer, a murderer, and such a bad father that his own son led a rebellion against him. It didn't matter. Samuel the prophet spoke for God, and declared that whatever tragedy David's life might bring, his inmost being, his "heart," was good.

How about nowadays? Does man still look upon the outward appearance? Sure. By and large, the world values people with reference to three qualities. Conveniently, they all begin with the letter "a." They are: attractiveness, affluence, and achievements. How do you look? How much money do you have? What have you done? None of them is bad in itself, and it's easy to see why they seem like the building blocks of happiness. We're all susceptible to their promise. Especially the young, or people at their 50th high school reunion still pretending to be young. I wanted to impress my old classmates with my \$30 haircut and my supposed career success. Instead, their memory will be the sight of me dropping and flopping on the hotel floor.

Attractiveness, affluence, achievements are not bad goals, but none of them is the main thing. The main thing is relationships. When we die, the measure of our lives will not be our beauty or our wealth or our deeds, so much as the quality of our relationships. And above all, our relationship to God.

Here's one more verse pertaining to that relationship. Did you know the Bible has a description of heart surgery?

A new heart will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. - Ezekiel 36:26

This is good news, and the context makes it even better. Ezekiel was a prophet during the Exile to Babylon and the destruction of Jerusalem. At first, he blamed the people for these disasters, by reason of their sinful ways and their relapse into idolatry. Later, he comforted them with the hope of being restored to the Promised Land, in peace and prosperity.

It echoes the situation of the other verses. As with Noah, as with David, so with those in Exile. God is aware of our weakness, even our self-inflicted wounds. Yet that knowledge is swallowed up by his compassion and grace. Even if our hearts have grown cold and hard, he promises not only to forgive, but to entirely renew us in our inmost being. He will change stone into flesh.

Case after case in the Old Testament reveals this pattern. God yearns for his people to live well, to live holy, to live happy, through the transformation of their hearts. The pattern culminates in the ministry of Jesus, who was first and foremost a good Jew. He recited the Shema, and in answer to a question, he added to it the commandment, "Love your neighbor as yourself." This raised compassion for all human beings, not just the people of Israel, or any ethnicity, to a new importance.

Are our hearts capable of such a standard? Yes, by faith, as our final verse states:

That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith . . . Ephesians 3:17

As to the process of having our hearts transformed, the mechanics of it, Bible professor Scott McKnight writes this in his book *The Jesus Creed*:

Knowing God's love begins when we open our hearts to Abba's love. Opening here is a metaphor for vulnerability to God in the quiet of our hearts; it is trusting God's love the way we relax on a doctor's table, knowing he or she can heal us. Healing can't happen until we relax in trust. We trust or become 'open' to Abba's love by sitting in his presence until we are inwardly still, clearing our minds of clutter, focusing on God.

After my experience with heart surgery, I could grasp this picture very well. Thanks to modern medicine, my physical heart is thriving and I'm grateful. Thanks to scriptural wisdom, my metaphorical heart is also in good hands. May we all be enabled to open our inmost beings to our loving God, to relax and trust and await the healing.

- Tom Griffith