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The Jesus Prescription for Healthy Living: A Healthy Heart
Philippians 4.8; Matthew 22.34-40

The Dalai Lama once said, “Love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries. Without them, the heart of humanity cannot survive. Without them, your heart cannot survive.”

Every day we never question the need to eat or to sleep. They are necessary for our survival, our health, our well-being. What if we approached expressing love and compassion in the same way...not as a luxury but as a necessity for our soul health . . . our spiritual well-being?

We pay more attention these days to foods that are heart healthy. What if we paid attention to daily spiritual practices that keep our hearts healthy?

Jesus was asked by a religious scholar, ‘Okay, Jesus, if you’re so smart, out of the 600 plus commandments, which one is most important?’ Jesus said, ‘Love. There’s nothing more important than love. Love God. Love your neighbor. Love yourself. That’s the great commandment. All the other laws hang on this.’”

And the implication is that loving God, loving your neighbor and loving yourself are tied together...they are major arteries connected to the same beating heart. If one has blockage, it affects the flow to the others.

So the question I want to ask on this Rally Day – are you heart healthy? Are we heart healthy as a community of faith? What are the spiritual practices we can commit to this year that promote healthy hearts and a generous and healthy flow of love?

How would you compare your relationship with God compared to what it was last week, last month, last year, 10 years ago? In what direction your relationship with God headed? Do you have a growing and deepening and growing sense of God's unconditional love for you? Do you have a growing and deepening sense of what it means to be a child of God...what it means to be beloved?

Are you a more loving person today than you were a year ago? Are you a more compassionate person? Do you feel a greater connection with others...a greater sense of empathy, than a year ago? Are you more aware of the suffering of others than you were a year ago?

What will help us deepen our connection to God's love and grow to be more loving persons. Jesus suggests in our Bible reading today that's the bottom line.

Father Richard Rohr says, "Who cares what I believe. I can believe a lot of things and still not be a more loving and whole person."

Some one suggested to imagine life as a test and there is only one question we have to answer: Have you loved well?

The good news is we are children of God's heart. It is God's unconditional love flowing through our veins. It is God's compassionate heart beating within our own hearts.

What are those daily spiritual practices that will clear the blockages out of the way and allow that love to flow freely, generously, passionately in and through us? What are the spiritual practices that will deepen our sense of Grace and lead us to being a more grace-filled presence in the world? What are those practices that will help us acknowledge the intrinsic value and unique worth of ourselves and of each and every human being? What are those practices that will help us recognize that the needs of another are

just as important as our own needs? Love God. Love your neighbor. Love yourself.

One spiritual practice for healthy hearts is to contemplate daily a God of unconditional love. That may seem simplistic but it has profound implications.

Presbyterian Pastor, Carol Howard Merritt, writes a blog I highly recommend called *The Tribal Church*. You can find it on www.thetribalchurch.org. She wrote last month about growing up with a picture of an angry, jealous and petty God.

She said as a young girl she would listen to sermons that told her that if she did not accept Jesus Christ into her heart, she would be thrown into a fiery pit for an eternity of weeping and gnashing of teeth.

She said the threats worked. She was scared to death so she invited Jesus into her heart. And then she did it again and again and again...just in case it didn't stick the first time...just in case it wasn't sincere enough...just in case she lost her entry ticket into heaven...just in case she had done something that did not merit God's love that week...just in case God was angry at her for some reason...she just kept asking.

She said she grew up with the view that she was in the hands of an angry, insecure and judgmental God. Just like a tiny spider who was held over the fire, she would be singed unless she loved God.

This was the God she grew up with and it created a great deal of anxiety and fear. It was a God who would withhold love except if people came asking for it. It was a view of a God who would allow a person to suffer, unless she worshipped God in a certain way or prayed a particular formulaic kind of prayer.

It was a concept of God that gave her the sense that she was never worthy of love or acceptance, and therefore in turn, no one else was either. It was a view of God that enflamed intolerance toward people who did not share the same views. I know many of you have had similar experiences.

Carol says, however, that this idea of God that she carried with her for so many years ran contrary to the very nature of what the scripture says...**THAT GOD IS LOVE**...ran contrary to what Jesus said, “Out of all those laws and rules and commandments, what matters most is love...to love God, love our neighbors and love ourselves...and all of that is very difficult to do when the source of that love is jealous, angry and intolerant.”¹

So, the first spiritual practice of a healthy heart is to contemplate daily the mysterious presence of a God of unconditional love...to contemplate we are the children of God’s loving heart...it is God’s unconditional love flowing through our veins...God’s compassionate heart beating within our hearts.

Andrew Newberg, a neuroscientist, wrote a book with Mark Waldman, a therapist called *How God Changes Your Brain*. As the title suggests, their research shows that the daily spiritual practice of contemplating a God of unconditional love will literally change your brain.

Even though our brains begin to lose abilities and begin to slow down at the age of 30 (how scary is that?), meditating, centering prayer and contemplating a God of unconditional love can literally slow down the aging process. These spiritual practices help the brain grow.

These scientists have shown in their research that contemplating a God of unconditional love each day literally changes the wiring and neural circuits of our brain. It improves our cognitive health

and increases our capacity for compassion and empathy. Isn't that amazing! The spiritual practice and discipline of contemplating a God of love each day can literally transform you into a more loving person.

Newberg and Waldman, in their book, explain how anger and prejudice generated by extreme beliefs not only damage your heart but also damages your brain.

But contemplating a God who is loving, rather than vengeful; a God who is compassionate, rather than judging, reduces anxiety and stress, and increases the feelings of compassion, sympathy and love. ²

Behind this science, is the mystery of our faith that trusts we are children of God's heart; God's unconditional love is flowing through our veins; God's compassionate heart is beating within our own hearts.

Could there be anything more important than the spiritual practice of contemplating this Grace every day that we might be transformed and embody that Grace and carry and live that Grace into the world?

One of my favorite writers is Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal Priest who teaches religion at Piedmont College in Georgia. She told this story: "A few years ago I was lucky enough to teach this big, rambunctious girl I'll call 'Rose' who was a theater major with only a peripheral interest in religion.

She had a wild head of black hair that went in all directions at once. She wore the kind of clothes that let you see most of her tattoos even when it was cold outside.

She spoke with a little lisp, and she was willing to say absolutely anything that came into her mind, which was alright, since what she had to say was usually worth listening to. During her last semester she came into class with a new tattoo on her shoulder that said ‘and’. A-N-D, all lower case. Just “and”.

“And, what?” I asked her. “Is there more I can’t see?” “Nope,” she said, “that’s all there is. Just ‘and’.”

Then she told me about this project she was involved in. It was a “living novel” project, in which some one who was writing a work of fiction had posted an ad on the internet for any one willing to tattoo one word of that novel on his or her body. My student volunteered to take part; “and” was her word.

When the author came up with enough volunteers, and they all had their word tattooed on their body, Rose explained, they were all going to get together some place where there was a lot of room and they were going to BE the living novel; by standing in the right order and then baring the part of their body that had their word on it.

Meanwhile, the author was apparently taking great satisfaction in thinking of the words of the novel all walking around the world, doing whatever the host bodies were doing; shopping for groceries; going to school; painting houses; playing with children.

And, no doubt explaining their word to all the curious people like me who asked, so that the novel forged relationships even between people who would never read it.

All because some crazy person, like my student, agreed to bear one word in their flesh and carry that word with them wherever they went. Taylor concluded her story with this observation: I figure

we're all bearing at least one word for good or ill into this world. The question is, "What is it?"³

On this Rally Day, may we recognize and contemplate daily we each bear God's living word of love, we are the heroes and heroines of God's living novel of redeeming the world with that love. And.

Take a moment to contemplate and let soak in this amazing truth: We are the children of God's heart. God's unconditional love is flowing through our veins. God's compassionate heart is beating within our own hearts.

¹ Carol Howard Merritt, www.TribalChurch.org, Aug. 3, 2009

² Andrew Newberg and Mark Robert Waldman, How God Changes our Brain, Random House, New York, 2009

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, from a lecture given June 27, 2009 at UCC General Synod