**Soul Tending**



***Tending The Heart***

HOW DID JESUS TEND HIS HEART? BEFORE WE CAN ANSWER THAT questtion, we must reflect on what we mean by heart. If we take that word literally, we may once again think about diet, exercise, cholesterol, and stress tests. Our understanding of the heart, however, encompasses more than a vital organ of the body. Jesus speaks about at least three aspects of the heart: condition, function or activity, and location. Perhaps by considering Jesus' words about each of these aspects we can better understand the meaning of heart in the Gospels.

Describing a possible condition of the heart, Jesus says that the "pure in heart" will see God (Matthew 5:8). In the parable of the Sower, he teaches that those who are like the good soil will hear the word and hold it "in an honest and good heart" (Luke 8:15). In contrast, those whose hearts are hardened—including the Pharisees (Mark 3:5) and, at times, the disciples (Mark 6:52)—do not understand or do not accept Jesus and his teaching. In other examples, Jesus talks about the heart being troubled (John 14:1) or afraid (Mark 6:50b). Another description of the condition of the heart comes from the men on the road to Emmaus, who, when they recognize that they had been with Jesus, say that their hearts were burning within them (Luke 24:32). Thus, the condition of our hearts affects what we hear, or, at least, how we hear and what we understand.

The men going to Emmaus not only describe a condition of the heart, but they also suggest one function or role of the heart: perception or intuition. We will see later the vital role of the mind in our thinking and deciding, but we read in the Gospels that the heart also has a role in these activities. For example, in parallel texts about Jesus forgiving the sins of the paralyzed man before healing him, Jesus asks the scribes why they "think evil" (Matthew 9:4) or "raise such questions" (Mark 2:8) in their hearts. Another function of the heart is to hold and to express our emotions. If we are fearful, for example, we experience that in our heart. Similarly, an important activity of the heart, yet not the heart alone, is loving. The "greatest commandment" begins with "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart" (Luke 10:27).

A third aspect of the heart, its location, is also important for our understanding of the Gospels' view of heart. In Matthew 6:21, Jesus makes this simple statement: "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Often in his teaching and storytelling, as well as in his encounters with others, Jesus comments on the effects of being attached to things other than God. He warns, for example, of having a primary attachment to wealth. Jesus suggests such attachments reflect where we have put our heart.

What, then, can we conclude about the meaning of heart? The heart is one key to our understanding of what we hear, of what we see, and of the people and situations we encounter. It holds and expresses our emotions. It contributes an emotional dimension to our decisions. The heart follows what we value and binds us to that treasure. Given this, how might we tend our hearts? We can take care how we deal with and express our emotions. We can admit what we treasure and assess the consequences of those choices. And we can nurture healthy, close relationships with others. The reflections that follow offer insights and examples regarding how Jesus tended his heart in each of these ways.

Jesus said, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21). This verse is part of a brief passage in the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus said we are to store up treasure in heaven rather than on earth. Our heart, he explained, moves to and resides with our treasure. Our "treasure" is what we value most, our priority in life. Our priority is determined not by what we say but by how we live. It is whatever we are attached to in such a way that we cannot imagine letting go. Our treasure, then, may be a thing, an activity, an attitude, a person, or a habit. The condition of our hearts is dependent on what we treasure. If our priority is something that is destructive or that does not satisfy, we will have a troubled and unhealthy heart.

Jesus' priority was his relationship with God. He lived in harmony with God and in accordance with God's requirement "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with . . . God" (Micah 6:8). During his life, he followed a path in keeping with God's will. He tended his heart by not letting any other priority come between himself and God. Being well aware of the earthly treasures that tempt women and men, Jesus preached against these often. Frequently he challenged persons he encountered to look honestly at themselves and to consider what they treasured.

The most common and most dangerous "treasure," and the attachment Jesus preached against most often, is wealth. Recognizing that being rich can easily become a stumbling block in one's relationship with God, Jesus preached that "you cannot serve God and wealth" (Matthew 6:24). He warned that "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (Luke 18:25). To impress on his listeners the danger of making wealth a priority, Jesus told parables. After the rich fool built more barns to hold his excess crops, God told him that his life would be taken that night. Jesus concluded the story, saying, "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God" (Luke 12:21).

In one of the best-known confrontations about priorities in the Gospels, Jesus told the rich ruler, who seemed proud of how he had kept the law, to "sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (Luke 18:22). The ruler refused because he was very rich. Jesus did not say that having wealth and making God top priority were absolutely incompatible. In fact, it is likely that women who provided for Jesus and friends who gave dinner parties and feasts in his honor had above-average means. Joseph of Arimathea, a disciple of Jesus, is even described as rich. Nevertheless, Jesus was clear about the difficulty of rich people being devoted to God.

The danger of being attached to power, authority, and position was another warning of Jesus. He frequently criticized the Pharisees for the arrogant ways they used their authority to accuse others of not following the law, to exclude Jews from the religious community, and to proclaim non-Jews outside of God's acceptance and love. Among many stinging charges, Jesus said of the scribes and Pharisees: "They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others. . . .

They do all their deeds to be seen by others. . . . They love to have the place of honor at banquets. . . . [They love] to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces" (Matthew 23:4-7). How heartbreaking the Pharisees' corruption of the religious community and system must have been for Jesus. The very ones who claimed to have God as their treasure were hypocrites who "on the outside look[ed] righteous to others, but inside . . . [were] full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (Matthew 23:28).

Jesus did not say that having authority and power precluded having a heart devoted to God. The centurion asking Jesus to heal his servant acknowledged his own authority yet humbled himself before Jesus, and Jesus commended the man's faith (Matthew 8:5-13). Yet when his own disciples, James and John, asked for places of power in Jesus' kingdom, Jesus questioned their understanding of what they were asking of him (Mark 10:35-40). Even these close friends and followers had their eyes on greatness. Jesus reminded them that his call, for himself and for every follower, was to be a servant.

In addition to wealth and power or position, Jesus noted other priorities that can draw the heart away from God. Some attachments he questioned may make us very uncomfortable. For example, he challenged placing top priority on home and family responsibilities (Luke 9:57-62) and even family itself (Mark 3:31-35). Jesus was called to a life that did not include commitment to a spouse and children. Then and now, disciples of Jesus also have heard and accepted a call not to marry. Though Jesus did not mandate such a life for all his disciples, he did call us all to the sometimes difficult discernment of keeping God our priority amid conflicting demands from family.

Another discomforting priority challenged by Jesus was prejudice. By dining with tax collectors and sinners and journeying to areas where Gentiles lived, Jesus rejected the prejudice seen in the religious leaders and, at times, in the disciples. He was criticized for his association with people the religious leaders labeled "unclean." We may not think of labeling prejudice as a "treasure." However, if we live with prejudice as a priority, it does capture our heart and separate us from God. How can we claim to follow a God of justice, mercy, and love while at the same time blatantly, or subtly, excluding certain people from an equal measure of God's love? Doing so creates an internal conflict that is destructive to our hearts.

Jesus tended his heart by keeping it next to God, his treasure. His own choice was to eschew any wealth whatsoever. He enjoyed the hospitality and generosity of friends and followers, yet as far as we know, he kept no possessions beyond his immediate needs. Though he spoke with authority, he avoided any position of authority or power. Once, after Jesus preached to a large crowd and fed them bread and fish, the people recognized him as a prophet and planned to make him king (John 6:1-15). Jesus, however, went away by himself to a mountain, rejecting this opportunity for power. No attachment separated him from God, including family. In addition to rejecting each of these potential treasures, Jesus did not harbor any prejudice. He extended his compassion and love to women and men, to poor and rich, to powerless and powerful, to young and old, to outcasts and privileged ones.

Jesus did what he needed to do to pursue the ministry to which he had been called. Though he did not insist that all his followers remain unattached to family or refuse any possessions or avoid any position of authority, his own example and his warnings about dangerous attachments serve as guides for us. Jesus' teaching and example call us to be attentive to and in prayer about how we acquire and use our wealth and our power. His words also challenge us to examine the importance of our relationships, our jobs, our prejudices, and other "treasures" that could become a top priority in our lives. Our own discomfort— about a sermon we heard on riches or about the person sitting next to us at a game or concert, for example—may be a signal that we need to examine our "treasures." Jesus said, "No one can serve two masters" (Matthew 6:24). A heart divided between two allegiances will be torn apart. A well-tended heart, however, follows the commandment that Jesus acknowledged was the greatest: Love God with your whole heart.