



“The Secret of Life: 3. Coronary Care”

Texts: Ezekiel 36:22-31 and Luke 10:29-37

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I was taught to never preach something about which you had no interest or concern. With that in mind, and in keeping with our series of sermons on “The Secret of Life,” I offer you this sermon about which I know something and about which I have significant concerns.

Our sermon is entitled, “Coronary Care,” and I know something about the subject and have no small amount of concern about it. A little over a year ago, I was diagnosed with congestive heart failure. With the excellent ministrations of a superb cardiologist, I am doing very well. After my recent sojourn in the hospital, and the continuing weight loss I am experiencing, both my cardiologist and I expect continued improvement over what should be a nice, long life.

Still, as I think about over my 30+ years of ministry, the number one reason I am called to visit a hospital is due to some form of coronary incident. According to the Center for Disease Control:

Heart disease is the leading cause of death in the United States. More than 600,000 Americans die of heart disease each year. That’s one in every four deaths in this country.

The term “heart disease” refers to several types of heart conditions. The most common type is coronary artery disease, which can cause heart attack. Other kinds of heart disease may involve the valves in the heart, or the heart may not pump well and cause heart failure. Some people are born with heart disease.

Anyone, including children, can develop heart disease. It occurs when a substance called plaque builds up in your arteries. When this happens, your arteries can narrow over time, reducing blood flow to the heart.

Smoking, eating an unhealthy diet, and not getting enough exercise all increase your risk for having heart disease.¹

A member of one of my former congregations had a heart condition known as calcific pericarditis. With this unique condition, the pericardium - which is the sack which surrounds the heart - has a continuing build up of calcium - which hardens and prevents the heart from pumping properly. It's rather unique and rare: a heart that seems to be turning to stone.

Ezekiel knew nothing of coronary care as we have been looking at it. But, he knew that there seemed to be a spiritual coronary care problem. To Ezekiel came the Word of the Lord and it called Ezekiel to preach to the people:

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

I will put my spirit within you,
—and make you follow my statutes
and be careful to observe my ordinance.

Then you shall live in the land that I gave your ancestors;
—and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.

The house of Israel had abandoned God and God's law and God's way. Ezekiel, as God's prophet, was commissioned to call the people back to God's way, which is the work of all true prophets. The people were sick - "sin sick" as the old hymn calls it - and Ezekiel was sent with the cure.

The people had abandoned God's way.

Injustice was rampant.

The poor were ignored and mistreated.

The commandments of God held no sway.

Hatred and conflict were widespread.

The needs of the broken and forgotten were ignored.

The heart of the people had turned to stone - had hardened - had calcified.

God's prescription: a complete heart transplant. The heart of stone would be removed. A new heart - warm and vital - a heart of flesh - would be placed within the corporate body of the people and they would live to the glory of God.

One of the challenges of being on vacation and then on some medical leave is that I have had the opportunity to pay a little more attention to the news than I would otherwise have. I'm not sure it was the best medicine. The news has not been good and I am not one of those who believe that the news media is lying to us in what they report.

As I have watched, and listened, and read, I have come to the conclusion that we are in critical need of coronary care. The heart of this nation is diseased. It is weakened and weary. The heart of our nation is turning to stone.

Families are being separated at our borders.

People - including children - are being treated like animals, and jammed into cages and pens.

White supremacy and white nationalism is on the rise, with its members being heralded as "good people."

Incidents of violent anti-Semitism are on the rise.

The rich and being enriched at the cost of the poor becoming poorer.

We are strangling the life from the planet we call home.

We are legalizing injustice, from the Department of Justice to the treatment of African-American citizens at the hands of law enforcement.

Lies are accepted as truth.

Immoral behavior of every kind is accepted as not a problem by those who used to prosecute those they thought to be immoral.

There is more, but the case is made. The heart of this nation is turning to stone. There is decreasing compassion, a lessening of understanding, and a dwindling commitment to our centuries old mission of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness". We are suffering from a complete and total lack of coronary care.

Jesus was having a conversation with a student of the law. It was a good conversation. The student asked the Teacher, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus replied, "You are a good student. What does the law tell you?" The student replied, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind" and "love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus commended the student for his answer. But then, the student asked this question: "Who is my neighbor?"

To answer this question, Jesus tells the parable of the good Samaritan. We all know it. We've heard it many times. A man is beaten, robbed, and left for dead by the side of the road. A religious leader came upon the man and passed him by. A student of the law came by and passed him by. Then a Samaritan came by, cared for the beaten man, took him to an inn, and paid for his care, promising more money if it was needed. A Samaritan, an enemy of the Jewish people, cared for the man - presumably Jewish. Jesus posed the question:

“Which of the three was a neighbor to the man who was beaten and abandoned?” The student of the law said, “The one who showed him mercy - or - the one who practiced compassion.” Jesus replied, “Go and do likewise.”

Jesus could have replied, “the one who had a heart of flesh and not a heart of stone.” A heart of flesh is a heart that is filled with compassion, kindheartedness, and understanding. A heart of flesh is a heart that is open to the wounds and brokenness of the other. A heart of flesh never sees another as anything but created in the same image of God in which all people are created and would never dismiss and degrade another because of differences - real or perceived. A heart of flesh seeks the best for all people - friend or supposed enemy. A heart of flesh has no room for prejudice, bigotry, falsehood, pettiness, or division.

It is easy to be absorbed into the cynicism and disparagement of our day. It is quite simple to be swept up in the dissection of our society and world that is currently underway. And, as we have seen just this week, it is more than trouble-free to remain silent while vile and disgusting statements are made that echo the ancient words of segregation and isolation from generations past.

God calls us to practice significant coronary care. God calls us to be people who have hearts of flesh - compassionate and kind. God calls us to be done with hearts of stone - malice and falsehood. God calls us to be people of mercy - compassion - and grace.

So, I'll ask you: “how's your heart?” Is there still compassion, kindness, and understanding within you? Do you see the broken and battered, not only by the side of the road, but in your neighborhood, and in those parts of town where you would never travel? Does the life situation of others cause you concern and even pain?

I'll tell you what I know. In my ministerial travels over the last 30+ years, the happiest people I have met along the way were those who had generous hearts of flesh, who cared for their neighbors, who stayed close to God and God's way. The happiest people I have known were caring, compassionate, and were generous in sharing that love with others.

How's your heart? Please practice a coronary care that will bless your body and a coronary care that will bless the world.

For now and evermore. Amen.