

Sharing Our Hearts

February 28, 2021

This Lent, we're working with the themes from a devotional from Illustrated Ministry called, "Reflections On the Heart." They have a deeper publication on the same themes, called "Where Your Heart Is." Let me know if you'd like us to send that PDF to you, too.

This week, the devotionals invite us to pray with the Gospel passage that we just read, the story of Jesus and his family going to the temple in Jerusalem when he was 12 years old. All of my life, I've heard this passage described as "Jesus getting lost in the temple," but on more careful reading, there's nothing about Jesus getting lost, though there is a thread of Jesus' parents losing him.

This nuance ends up being important.

The writers of our devotional invite us to use this passage as a springboard into exploring where our hearts are and encouraging others to share where their hearts are. Their premise is that Jesus' heart, his passion, his interest, is in the temple, engaging matters of faith among the teachers. When Jesus asks, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I would be in my father's house?" the devotional writers suggest that what's going on here is that Jesus' parents don't understand where his heart is, don't understand what makes him tick, what's important to him. They suggest that Jesus' focus on the spiritual, his inquisitive nature, his interest in the deep questions that the teachers at the temple would have been engaging, was probably nothing new in his life, but that his parents, for whatever reason, didn't realize it. Through this lens, they encourage us to think of sharing what is most important in our lives as a spiritual practice, as well as to draw out that kind of sharing from others.

This line of thought brought to mind some of the principles that Julie Harder taught us several years ago when Union offered a couples workshop based on the "Seven Principles of Making Marriage Work" by John and Julie Gottman. It was a wonderful workshop that, even several years later, my husband and I still reference. (Don't fret if you weren't able to participate in the first round; we hope to offer it again, when there is enough interest in another group.)

In particular, our devotional's focus on sharing one's heart brought to mind one of the behaviors that the Gottmans suggest: investing time to get to know your partner's world by building what they call "Love Maps." Certified Gottman therapist Zach Brittle describes building Love Maps this way:

"When you choose to spend your life with someone, you hand them a map to your inner world. Your inner world is, of course, quite complex including the memories of your past, the details of your present, your hopes for the future. It includes your deepest fears and your grandest dreams. But the map you hand your partner is a pencil sketch. The task for couples is to intentionally and regularly be adding details to that map. It needs scale, direction, a legend. Over the course of a lifetime, you will be constantly adding landmarks, texture, color. A detailed Love Map brings perspective to the twists and turns" that relationships inevitably face.

I would add to this map metaphor that new roads are often being built, and old roads sometimes fall into disuse. In short, building Love Maps is showing interest in who your partner is, in how they work, in what is important to them, and being willing to share your inner life in return. (Lest you tune out because I'm lifting up this principle in the context of partnered relationships, let me tell you that innumerable lessons from the Gottman materials translate into plain old good communication and relationship building. Yes, their work is targeted toward couples, but behaviors like engaging in a "slow start up" when you're addressing difficult issues, or recognizing and acknowledging when someone makes a "bid" for your attention, are helpful practices regardless of the relationship.)

I bring up this practice of building Love Maps in the context of our Lenten exploration of sharing our hearts, to suggest that curiosity and inquisitiveness in regard to another's inner life, as well as willingness to share one's own inner life, has the potential to be a powerful spiritual practice. I've shared with you before the double-edged principle that, on the one hand, one of the greatest human hungers is to know and be known, while on the other hand, one of the greatest human fears is that if you really knew me you would leave.

One of the truths of the Christian faith is God's ultimate fidelity, that God knows us completely and vows to be in relationship with us even with that knowledge. A powerful way of embodying our faith, then, is to model that abundant fidelity for others, truly seeking to know them at their depths.

One of the authors of our Lenten devotional lifts up this example: His oldest son loves Minecraft and was always trying to tell him about it, trying to show him what he's doing. Our author paid attention...kind of. The son kept asking dad to learn the game, and so they struck a deal: Dad would learn Minecraft if the son would learn ancient Hebrew. The son agreed to spend time learning about something dad loves, because he's so interested in dad joining him in something that he loves. Our author reflects, "Maybe I won't end up loving his game or end up wanting to spend my time building worlds there. Maybe he won't end up loving ancient Hebrew and end up wanting to spend his time reading the Psalms with all of their original nuances. Even so, we will try to meet each other's hearts."

If this doesn't seem very Lenten, that's because, after consulting with Worship Ministry this winter, I decided to work with this devotional instead of the traditional Lenten texts. Given the loss of 500,000 lives to COVID-19 in 11 months and all of the psychological and spiritual struggles that have gone along with the isolation and distance and uncertainty and chaos of this year, focusing on personal asceticism and picking up our crosses felt like it had too much potential to come across as tone deaf. Yet, even though we're not proclaiming the most common scripture texts of this church season, I think sharing our hearts is still abundantly Lenten.

In the weekly email that we sent on Friday, I wrote about how most often we talk about Lent as preparing us for Easter, for resurrection, and while I do think that sharing our hearts, and investing in ways of being that encourage people to share their hearts, will prepare us to experience God's renewal and rebirth, I'm struck this year that, along with preparing us for Easter, practicing the church season of Lent prepares us for the personal seasons of Lent that will cross our lives:

The death of a loved one.
The death of a dream.

Depression.
Depression in a loved one.
Personal failure.

In Lent, we consciously choose to spend a season reorienting ourselves to God's ways. Choosing to "embrace a season of reflection, repentance, and renewal is a wise thing to do. It will provide you with strength and resilience for a season of testing that will NOT be your choosing. "Life is full of Lents, seasons when we feel isolated, hungry, tested, and challenged." (Michael Piazza)

And so, as we continue walking this non-traditional Lenten journey together, my prayer for us all is that, whether it is through the practice of sharing our hearts and encouraging others to do the same, or other spiritual practices of your choosing, each of us will reorient ourselves to God's ways, and in doing so, we will prepare ourselves for both the struggles and the joys that are to come.

As we walk this season, help us to share our hearts and practice holy curiosity as we open our hearts to others. May they know their belovedness because of knowing us.

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