

Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B

Dt 6:2-6

Ps 18:2-3, 3-4, 47, 51

Heb 7:23-28

Mk 12:28b-34

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It seems that today, perhaps more than ever before, people are seeking all kinds of ways to deal with the stress and tension of modern living. The popularity of less traditional remedies to the ailments that accompany our demanding schedules has turned into a multi-million-dollar industry. Many of the most popular forms of alternative healing bring together the concern of medicine for the body with a special attention to the spiritual aspects of healing in the whole person. Many people have turned to solutions offered by acupuncture and acupressure to return equilibrium and wholeness to fragmented and frazzled lifestyles.

Acupuncture and acupressure are grounded in the basic techniques of Chinese medicine, addressing what its practitioners describe as the 'vital energies' which move through each human being. In perfect equilibrium these energies balance us mentally, physically, and spiritually, allowing us to live to our maximum potential. This life force, if you will, moves through our body through specific channels described as 'meridians'. The human heart is, for obvious reasons, central to the health of the whole body, but it has a specific and most acute relationship with palms of our hands. Practitioners of these ancient arts of healing believe that the heart is directly connected with the palms of our hand in a channel of energy, a meridian, which provides life for the whole body. And thus, in almost all religious traditions, we press our palms together in a gesture of prayer connecting the hands to enter the heart in order to converse with the creator of all life force, God.

This biological philosophy can illuminate the connection between the body and the soul for our spiritual journeys as we struggle to make sense of what God wants us to learn through the wholeness of the life he has given us. It also gives interesting perspective on the mandate found in today's Gospel, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength".

Matthew's Gospel offers us the image of the scribe approaching Jesus and asking him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus, in turn, responds with a call to complete devotion, foregrounding the affectivity of the human heart over compliance with the more rational aspects of legal observance which would have preoccupied the spirituality of a scribe. Before all other things Jesus instructs the scribe, and thus commands us, that loving with our whole heart is the first step towards more deeply and completely fulfilling the will of God in our lives.

The heart is commonly associated with notions of love, of commitment, of intention, and of passion. The connection between the heart and the mind is the essence of the Christian journey as we try to feel in our hearts what we profess on our lips. It is the contradiction between what we say and what we feel that creates tension in our lives

and prevents the commands of God from manifesting themselves in the world.

What does that mean? When we profess that Jesus is Lord we attest to the truth of his call and become advocates for his vision of the world. Consequently we take on his concerns and work for the manifestation of his principles in the world in which we live. When we describe ourselves as Christians we, in a sense, describe ourselves as Christ-like. Rationally that is a no-brainer; in our hearts it becomes more complex. Do we really believe in advocacy for the poor, or do we blame the poor for their poverty? Do we believe in the dignity and honor of all people, or only those who we think live as we feel they should? Do we forgive as Jesus did, or find satisfaction in harboring our own hurts and prejudices? Do we work for justice and pray for peace, or do we advocate dominance or privilege and justify the principles violence for violence?

I believe it is a little of both sides in all of our lives. And so we gather in these holy places, these sacred spaces throughout the world as Church with the hope that we will become more Christ-like as each week passes. We take instruction from the scriptures, admonish one another to be more open and gentle, and we eat from the sacred table of the Eucharist in a spiritual-reach to connect our minds with our hearts. We receive the Body of Christ on our palms, praying that it will transform our hearts. We rely on the Lord to unite these vital life energies.

What I really like most about the concept of meridians, of the flow of energy that moves through the wholeness of the human person, is that our hearts are connected to our hands and not our mouths. So we look to what we do, not what we say to discover the truth of our own commitment to the commands of God for right living. We test the call of Jesus to love the Lord with our whole hearts by the work of our hands. We press our hands together in prayer to connect the hands with the heart and drink deeply of the grace of God, and once we have been balanced and filled with that peace and passion we go forth, opening our hands in order to touch the world in which we live with the Spirit and presence of Jesus Christ, our wholeness and our balance.