Open heart vs closed heart sermon

“‘For here’s what I’m going to do: I’m going to take you out of these countries, gather you from all over, and bring you back to your own land. I’ll pour pure water over you and scrub you clean. I’ll give you a new heart, put a new spirit in you. I’ll remove the stone heart from your body and replace it with a heart that’s God-willed, not self-willed. I’ll put my Spirit in you and make it possible for you to do what I tell you and live by my commands. You’ll once again live in the land I gave your ancestors. You’ll be my people! I’ll be your God!

Ezekial 36: 24-27

The prophet Ezekial talks about the people of Israel having a heart of stone. They were an exiled people, conquered, deprived of hope, and left desolate by other nations, presumably because of their own doing, their own failure to following the ways of God. Isn’t that exactly what we do? We follow our own self-centered ways with a closed heart to the needs of others. We focus on personal achievement over compassion for others. We focus on our own prestige and try our best to exert power and control over others. We progressively narrow our focus to only us and those who we think can help us achieve our goals and this leads us to develop a heart of stone, a heart that is not connected with God.

Or maybe we start with an open and expansive heart and then we get hurt. Life can be cruel. Tweety was your best friend. They call her Tweety because she was tiny like Tweety Bird. You told Tweety everything and then she betrays you. She makes a play for your man. You will never forgive her. Or maybe it’s Joey. He was your man. He said he’d love you and protect you but now he’s hitting you and making you feel small, like you don’t even count. Or perhaps there was Jeff and Diane, your neighbors down the street, that led you into drug use, or perhaps addiction or dealing and now you are in prison. Yes, someone, or maybe even a group of people, has abandoned, abused, or betrayed you. So you decide to build a hard shell around yourself. No one is going to hurt you ever again. You will never be fooled ever again. Day by day, week by week, year by year, you place armor plates around you until nothing can get in to hurt you. You have closed your heart and it has hardened into stone. The problem with this is that you have also suffocated your soul. What is your soul? I believe it is nothing less than the God within you that can only be expressed through the uniqueness that is you. Yes, the all-encompassing energy, life force, presence, and spirt that is God is all around us, but it is also within us. Didn’t Jesus say that the kingdom of God is within. Aren’t we told that we are created in the image of God. Yes, that Godliness within is your soul and it craves connection with others. It craves expansiveness. All our souls are meant to be intertwined, but your soul, hiding behind that armor, is now suffocated. You will no longer be able to experience the God-given joy placed within you. Your heart of stone will no longer let God’s love that resides in you express itself. You will never be able to experience the beauty and love God has in store for you. You lose the ability to forgive, only looking for revenge and retaliation against those who have hurt you. You shut off your relationship with God. You lose the ability to feel gratitude for the blessings you have. At best you turn into a cynical, nasty, judgmental version of yourself. At worse, you turn to brutality and violence.

So how do we turn that heart of stone into flesh, the closed heart into an open one? The answer is in our scripture reading above. Only God changes a heart of stone into flesh. It is through immersing ourselves in God, bathing ourselves in the spirit, the presence, the life force that we know as God that we can begin to open our heart. Only love can change a heart and God is love. That’s what John says in his epistle. God is love. It is through being born again from above with spirit, as Jesus told Nicodemus, that we repair ourselves.

One of those places is worship. Hopefully you experience the spirit of God during worship through prayers and music, and the words of a sermon.

Prayer is central to finding that spirit. Naomi Levy, author of Einstein and the Rabbi: Searching for the Soul describes prayer in this way, “When we are empty, when we feel as if we have nothing left to give, prayer fills us up. It revives our souls. It calms, it reassures, it rekindles hope. Prayer in community connects disparate souls in a great oneness. Prayer on your own reminds you that you are not alone, that the Infinite One is close. Prayer helps you remember your dreams, your longings, all the hopes you’ve been ignoring or running from. Prayer helps you remember that you have a soul that is crying out within you. Prayer is the space we make for the soul within us to speak. It is an outpouring of our inner life. It is central to rekindling an open heart.”

Adopting meditative practices as you read scripture such as Lectio Devina, can place you into the presence of the God, a presence that emerges as you intently focus on a passage that speaks to you. Meditation such as centering prayer can also do that. You focus on a word or phrase that brings you closer to God and repeat that word or phrase over and over as you immerse yourself in God’s grace, God’s unconditional love and forgiveness. Pretty soon that begins to open your heart and as that grace flows into you, it can also begin to flow from you. your heart will soften toward those who might have hurt you. You start to become less cynical and less judgmental. You start to find it easier to forgive both yourself and others. You begin to adopt an attitude of repair and restoration for yourself and others instead of retribution. One of the cetering meditative practices I like I’ve adopted from Naomi Levi. I say the word Housa. See how easy it rolls off your tongue like waves rolling into shore. It is a Hebrew word that connotes the love that God has for imperfect people. I know how imperfect I am and by saying that word enough, over and over, I start to really accept that God can actually love this imperfect man, so just maybe I can also love other imperfect people. Maybe I can open my heart a little bit more.

You can immerse yourself in God’s presence through spiritual friends or participating in a supportive, inclusive, nonjudgmental faith community. Hopefully you are a part of that now.

You also experience God through nature. God’s strength is seen in amazing mountains or the ocean, God’s gentleness in the butterfly that flutters past you and in the beauty of the flower upon which it sets. Yes, take time to gaze upon nature and know that God is in that creation. An aspect of God is in everything you see.

As you allow God to open your heart, your soul will return from exile. Your vison will expand to see the needs of others, not just your own. You will look for opportunities to bring compassion to those in need. You will feel grateful for what you have and become generous with giving to others. You will rediscover the childlike awe you once felt toward God. Isn’t that what Jesus told his disciples, that they must become like children to enter the kingdom of God. You will begin to seek justice for all, not just yourself and when you are hurt, you will look for repair and restoration, not revenge. You will breathe more freely and see more clearly. You will no longer just see the world through those narrow slits in your armor, but instead will shed that armor to embrace an expansive vision of the world with all its beauty. People will gravitate to you because the light in your soul now shines. It’s like that song, This little light of mine. Hide it under a bushel, no, I’m going to let it shine.

Does an expansive, open heart mean that you can heal every relationship or fix every problem? Does it mean you will never be hurt again? No. Sometimes it is the expansive view of the soul alerts you that there is a problem. Sometimes it means leaving someone or even an entire community of people who have repeatedly hurt or abused you, or in some way belittled your existence. But remaining in the arms or God’s love can heal you and empower you to continue with an open heart, one that can repair itself and allow you to have an abundant life, filled with love. May it be so. Amen.