

22nd Sunday 2015

Introduction: Working Out

I doubt you are interested in my workout routine so I will mention it only in passing as a way of getting into today's Gospel. Most days I try to do between forty-five minutes and an hour on the elliptical. Elevating my heart rate for a sustained period of time is one of my main goals. Naturally, I want to have a good, healthy heart; in a word, I do cardio.

We might say that today's Scripture readings invite us "to do cardio" of another sort. The "heart" of which God's Word speaks is not merely the organ that pumps blood throughout our bodies. Rather, in Scripture "the heart" is our inmost self, the center of our being, our soul - "the deep wellspring of our words and actions." It is our inner depths where we decide either to respond to God or to resist him. From these same depths come feelings of love, anxiety, and joy, as well as our deepest thoughts and moral decisions.

Health-conscious people will carefully track their blood pressure, pulse, and heart rate. But how many people go thru life without examining their *heart of hearts*, the soul, to find out what shape the most precious core of their human existence might be in!

Objective Standards

When it comes to ordinary cardiac health, we know that the numbers don't lie. Stepping on the scale at the doctor's office, we know we're going to be told how much we weigh. If we look around the little examination room, we'll also find a chart telling us how much a person of height *ought* to weigh. As the blood pressure cuff is wrapped around our arm and we feel it tighten, we know we're about to learn whether our pressure is high, low, or just right. We may protest that we feel fine and want to keep on living as we wish, but if the numbers aren't good, the doctor will tell us we're headed for trouble. Objective standards or norms of wellness mean something.

The same is true when it comes to the health of our heart of hearts. It's very easy to engage in guess work - to tell ourselves that, while we have some shortcomings, we

are basically good people. We may acknowledge that God has given moral norms that pertain to not just how we behave in public but also to what we're like in private, including our thoughts and feelings about others, and when we look into our hearts, we find how easily we disregard God's law. But we may also tell ourselves that, at the end of the day, God grades on a curve, and so we presume we'll make out alright at the Throne of Judgment. Dear friends: God is merciful but his mercy must not be taken for granted! That is why we need to examine our consciences and seek God's forgiveness in the Sacrament of Mercy, the Sacrament of Reconciliation or Penance. Confessing our sins is an essential way of assessing and cleansing our hearts.

But there is another reason for making use of the Sacrament of Penance. Sometimes we may want others to think we are in good spiritual health when in fact we are sinning in thought, word, and deed. We try to give others the impression that we're better than we are. If we're not careful, pretty soon we'll start believing it ourselves. This is when our heart of hearts really gets out of shape. We become like a sick person trying to give the appearance of being healthy. All the more reason to visit the Divine Physician in the Sacrament of Penance!

Jesus and Pharisees

And this gets to the heart of what Jesus is talking about in today's Gospel passage. He's addressing leaders and experts in the law whose main concern was not taking to heart what the Law of Moses intended - love of God with one's mind, heart, and soul coupled with love of neighbor. Instead their main concern was the appearance of righteousness, they want to look respectable so as to be respected.

Now, as we listened to the Gospel, we may have wondered why Jesus went after the Pharisees and scribes for observing rules about washing hands as well as cups, jugs, kettles - and keeping one's bed clean. After all, we wouldn't think of doing otherwise! But for the Scribes and Pharisees the issue wasn't hygiene, but rather, ritual purity. There were very specific rules for purifying oneself and one's household items as a way of being prepared to enter the presence of God in an unsoiled fashion. To be clear, Jesus did not condemn people for following such rules; what he *did* condemn was that they neglected to purify their inner selves. They failed to wash the inside of the cup, that is to say, to purify their hearts. And in his

love, Jesus has given us the means truly to purify our hearts!

Organized Religion

Today, however, many people look askance at organized religion. They see churches, perhaps the Catholic Church in particular, as a bunch of regulations and rules with bishops and priests as enforcers. To many, the whole objective seems to be compliance with the Church's rules. When Jesus condemns those who "disregard God's commandment but instead cling to mere human tradition..." many feel this criticism applies to those who lead and participate in the life of the Catholic Church, with its institutions, forms of worship, hierarchical structure, and moral teaching. People ask: "Do these things really bring us closer to God and to one another?" "Wouldn't it be better," some say, "for one to be less 'religious' and more 'spiritual'?"

It's a fair question and we shouldn't shrink from dealing with it. On the one hand, being "spiritual" without any guideposts or community support, a do-it-yourself religion, if you will, runs the risk of self-deception and even self-righteousness. On the other hand, the Catholic faith or any organized religion can be approached as merely a matter of external observance, as a matter of going through the motions. For example, someone can claim we're Catholic merely because his family is Catholic, or keep some connection with the Church for sake of peace in the family, or merely as a way of 'keeping up appearances'. Many feel that they are 'Catholic' if they come to Mass only at Christmas or Easter. Yet, at the end of the day, such a tenuous connection with the Faith does not satisfy the deepest desire of every human heart for friendship with God & for authentic love, that love which alone enables us to make sense of lives. Jesus founded the Church knowing that we, its members, would be far from perfect. Even within the ranks of his own Apostles he suffered betrayal and abandonment. Yet the Lord willed that His Church be the principal channel of his grace, a great stream of truth, life, and holiness, a flowing fountain, to cleanse deeply with redeeming love the individual hearts of countless people, and happily, thankfully, that includes you and me!

To judge from appearances, Pope Francis does not look like an expert in cardio fitness! But pretty soon he'll be here in the United States to remind us personally how to make and keep our heart of hearts fit for the Kingdom of God. Pope Francis

will remind us that what's best for our aching, out-of-shape hearts is a deep and personal encounter with the Sacred Heart of Jesus, opening our hearts to the One whose love redeems us, refreshes us, and nourishes us. He will lead us in letting our hearts be overtaken by this greatest of all loves, such that we will become the Lord's true followers, and not only his followers but also his messengers – in phrase, he will invite you and me to “missionary discipleship”. Pope Francis will challenge us to be men and women who pray each day so that when we gather for liturgy we can really hear God's Word and really enter into the depths of Jesus' redeeming Presence in the Eucharist. In that way, in our personal lives we become the Lord's witnesses and plant the seeds of faith wherever we go. The Holy Father will also urge us to make our parishes, schools, and charitable works not mere institutions just like other institutions in our society – but communities of faith that are vibrant, alive and well-suited to bring the Gospel to the margins of society – to those who are most vulnerable and to those who are most resistant.

In this liturgy let us ask that we may open our hearts to God's Word and participate wholeheartedly in the Church's sacramental worship, so much so, that we will indeed obey the Commandments in the spirit of the Beatitudes, confident that ‘those who are pure of heart shall see God!’ May God bless us and keep us always in His love!