

With our celebration of Valentine’s Day on Monday (tomorrow), this weekend’s Scriptures by way of happy convergence challenge us to look at what lies or constitutes the heart of our being Jesus’ disciples.

About six years ago I experienced some heart-related medical symptoms. One of the medical tests done was an echo-cardiogram. During the procedure I was able to view a television monitor as the medical technician positioned an ultrasound wand on my chest and see the inner workings of my heart: blood flow, oxygen levels and witness its beating. I was surprised to see I actually had a heart! Kidding aside, the experience was a very spiritual one for me. I reflected how this organ, not seen, working in darkness, directs the life of my whole body.

This weekend we come to the “heart” of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. St. Paul and the Wisdom author Ben Sirach also focus on issues of the heart. Ben Sirach reminds us that life presents us with choices. Just as our physical lifestyle choices have consequences for our heart and overall health so, too, our soul’s, the presence of God’s life in the Holy Spirit breathed into us at conception and liturgically bestowed at baptism, choices have consequences. It is out of this truth of God’s indwelling presence, named “wisdom” by St. Paul that Jesus prompts us to take a personal “heart inventory”.

It is so easy to live life on the surface presuming that “feeling well” physically or spiritually means that we are, in fact, well and whole. My own physical experience with my heart (there having been no prior issues) taught me that just feeling well does not necessarily equate to being well. As a priest I sometimes hear people opine, “Well, Father, I think I’m a good Catholic. I haven’t killed anybody.” Jesus challenges us today that “looking good”, settling for the bare minimum of faith and church practice and “being good” are two different things. While assuring his original hearers and us that he has not come to do away with the Ten Commandments, the message of the prophets, and the other laws and customs of the Jewish tradition of his day Jesus clearly

demands more than minimal legalistic or religious observance demonstrated by the scribes and Pharisees, on the surface good and religiously observant people. To live the blessed life of the “Beatitudes” Jesus challenges us today to an inner change of heart. God, Jesus reminds us, does not just want the external observance of our lives, God hungers and thirsts for our hearts in the same measure as he has given us his heart in Jesus. God does not want to be a part of my life. God longs to *be* my life!

In his book “*finding sanctuary: Monastic Steps for Everyday Life*” which I am presently reading, British Benedictine Abbot Christopher Jamison cites a selection from St. Benedict’s “Rule for Monasteries” in which Benedict offers his monks a way to live the message of Sirach, St. Paul and Jesus in today’s Gospel. St. Benedict reminds his monks, and us, that the daily interactions of human life (choices at home, at work, at school, or wherever a day’s journey takes us and whomever we encounter) are crucial to the heart health of our spiritual life. Benedict writes: “You are not to act in anger or nurse a grudge. Rid your heart of all deceit. Never give a hollow greeting of peace or turn away when somebody needs your love. Bind yourself to no oath lest it prove false, but speak the truth with heart and tongue” (RB, 4:22-7).

Abbot Jamison suggests that we take St. Benedict’s words and substitute the first person verb “I” for Benedict’s “you” and use his words as a personal examination of conscience, of spiritual heart health, each day. “**I** do not act in anger or nurse a grudge. **I** rid my heart of all deceit. **I** never give a hallow greeting of peace and **I** never turn away when somebody needs my love. **I** speak the truth with heart and tongue.” Abbot Jamison comments that if this personalized version is hard to say, then keep it before you as both a summons each morning and a check list each night. Review the moments in which you have been true to these words and rejoice in those moments. Admit those moments of the day when you have failed to live out this ideal, ask God’s forgiveness, and prayerfully resolve to try again. Gradually, day by day, let the words move from your head to your heart until they start to shape your day and its relationships.

Wishing all of you a heart, and soul, healthy Valentine’s Day.