

HEART & HEAD

"Both/And" Sermon Series, week 1
A Sermon by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Mark 12:28-31
Acts 8:26-40

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Raise your hands if you can name these two characters of Star Trek fame? They are Mr. Spock and Dr. McCoy. Mr. Spock was the science officer as well as first officer of the Starship Enterprise; Dr. McCoy was the medical officer who was also known as Bones. If you've watched some or all of the 79 episodes of the original Star Trek show which ran only for three seasons from 1966-69 but because of syndication has mostly run continuously ever since, or if you have watched one or more of the six original cast movies that were released from 1979-91, then you, like me, are very familiar with these two characters. Spock, the son of a Human mother and a Vulcan father, is known for his ability to repress his emotional/human side and to rely solely on the facts of a situation, and his personal knowledge to come up with the most logical conclusion. Spock was a head guy. But McCoy or Bones was more of a heart guy. That doesn't mean he wasn't smart; he was a physician after all, but it was not unusual for him to have emotional outbursts when frustrated by the lack of feelings and compassion in Spock's logical conclusions.

On the Starship Enterprise's "five-year mission to explore strange new worlds..." it was as though the traits of heart and head most often found voice within the seemingly opposite characters of Spock and McCoy. But in real human life here on earth, "head and heart" are much better understood as two essential sides of the same coin rather than opposites that can seemingly exist separately and successfully without the other. Occasionally, we would get a glimpse of Spock's human, heart side, but he mostly repressed it, so Spock was never really a good example of one whose life revealed a healthy head and heart balance.

When it comes to faith, the separation of mind and heart results in a more shallow and less impactful faith. Can you think of a time when you let your heart get ahead of your head or perhaps a different time when you approached a situation only from a rational/intellectual perspective and your heart wasn't in it or perhaps you ignored the promptings of your heart?

There have certainly been times in each one of our lives when our head and our heart have been out of balance – times when either our emotions are running amuck, and we are no longer thinking rationally and times when our thinking and conclusions have not taken into consideration our feelings or the feelings of others. Being out of balance can certainly happen both in our daily secular living and in our daily living of a life of faith. When our heart and head are out of balance, the consequences of our words and actions typically make it clear that we are not being the person God created us to be. Scripturally, head and heart are not meant to compete as though one is more important than the other, they are instead meant to complement each other.

In Acts 8, I read to you the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, and how God's Spirit moved in both of their minds and hearts to get them to a place where a fuller, deeper faith was experienced. In the story, Philip, one of Jesus' original disciples, followed his heart, he followed the Spirit's leading to go out and stand along the wilderness road from Jerusalem to Gaza. If Philip relied solely on reason and intellect, he may well have concluded that such a decision was not only inconvenient, but it was also potentially dangerous. Philip ends up standing along a road that we would consider a desert road and he does so at a time when it was likely becoming uncomfortably hot; he doesn't know why he's there and what he's waiting for. But then he sees an Ethiopian man approaching him in a chariot. We are told the man is a eunuch, a castrated male. His castration could have been a birth defect or an accident, but it was more likely a royal decree. As a servant in the court of Queen Candace of the Ethiopians, his position likely resulted in his castration. Men were simply not allowed to be in such close proximity to the King's wife or wives, unless they were castrated. This particular man is the treasurer of the Queen's court, which means he is smart and trusted.

The Ethiopian is returning home from a visit to the temple in Jerusalem. He had gone there because he wanted to know more about Israel's God and the Jewish faith. While traveling in his chariot, he is seated and reading a scroll with words from the prophet Isaiah. *"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth"* (Acts 8:32-33, Isaiah 53).

The Ethiopian man is pondering this passage from Isaiah 53, and he is wondering who this person is that Isaiah is describing. While pondering, the man comes across Philip who felt compelled by God's Spirit to go up to the chariot and join it. So, as Philip ran up to it, he asked him, *"Do you understand what you are reading?"* (Acts 8:30). He offers to help him understand the passage, and the Ethiopian man is happy to have his help. So, Philip is invited to climb on board the chariot. The Ethiopian's first question is about whether the prophet is referring to himself or someone else? He is very captivated by the person Isaiah is describing and he really, really wants to know who that person is. Philip uses scripture and what he personally knows about Jesus to not only interpret the passage for the Ethiopian but to also proclaim the good news of Jesus to him. The Ethiopian man had already been engaging his mind intellectually while reading Isaiah, because he truly wanted to understand. But suddenly, his heart is moved by the good news of Jesus and a desire to be baptized wells up from within him.

Upon seeing water, the Ethiopian had the chariot stopped. The two of them go into the water and Philip baptizes him. Following his baptism and Philip's disappearance, we are told that the Ethiopian man *"went on his way rejoicing"* (Acts 8:39). Not only had he received from Philip knowledge about who Jesus was and what it meant to follow him, he also experienced an emotional, relational connection with Jesus that resulted in the faith commitment of baptism. In this passage and elsewhere in the Bible, we see that a transformational faith involves both head and heart. This story of Philip and the Ethiopian invites us to consider

the importance of cultivating both a faithful mind and a faithful heart, because both are extremely important to being a faithful follower of Jesus Christ.

In the Gospel of Mark, you heard the familiar words of the Great Commandment, "*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*" and "*you shall love your neighbor as yourself*" (Mark 12:30-31). To love God is to engage our heart, our soul, our mind and our strength. Loving God is about engaging our whole selves, not just certain parts of us. Heart, soul, mind and strength are meant to complement each other as together they lead us to a deeper, fuller experience of faith.

The life of John Wesley, the founding father of Methodism, exemplifies well the importance of both head and heart when it comes to faith. John was born in 1703 in Epworth England to Susanna and Samuel, a church of England pastor educated at Oxford and the pastor of the Epworth church. John was the fifteenth child of nineteen, only nine lived beyond infancy. As in many families at the time, Wesley's parents, and especially Susanna, actively participated in their children's early education. All the Wesley children, boys and girls, were taught to read as soon as they could walk and talk, and they were all expected to become proficient in Latin and Greek. From a young age and throughout their growing up years, they were also taught the importance of spiritual discipline.

At the age of 17, John entered Oxford University. He earned a Bachelor degree and then went on to earn a Master degree. He became a fellow and tutor at the University and felt called to ministry which led to his ordination as a priest of the church of England at the age of 25. Not only was John an intelligent, educated man, he was a man who enthusiastically embraced the practices of spiritual obedience. His was a rigidly methodical life of praying and studying Scripture, performing religious duties, and depriving himself so he would have alms to give to the poor. John became the leader of a small group started by his younger brother Charles after he began his degree work at Oxford. That group would become known as the Holy Club because it encouraged each of its members to live a devout and disciplined Christian life. John sailed to America thinking his disciplined life would have a positive impact on Native Americans and colonists alike, but after two years in Savannah, Georgia, John returned to England discouraged and even depressed. His High church practices and emphasis on strict discipline were not enthusiastically embraced by the colonists.

But on May 24, 1738, several weeks after returning to England, John attended a Moravian meeting in a building on Aldersgate Street in London. He had been inspired by the inner strength and deeply trusting faith of the Moravian Christians on his trip to America, and he went to the meeting feeling as though they had something he was lacking. Wesley describes his experience that evening with these words, "In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; an assurance was given me

that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.”

The experience was not a conversion because John had already been committed to Christ and living a life of faith ever since he was young. However, John stepped across a major threshold that evening on Aldersgate Street. His mostly head-faith, a faith based on the pursuit of scriptural knowledge and the strict discipline of obedient acts became something more. Following Aldersgate, Wesley began saying that saving faith is not a *"speculative, rational thing, a cold, lifeless assent, a train of ideas in the head; but also a disposition of the heart."* His "heart strangely warmed" experience was a new beginning for John – a beginning that caught fire and led to a highly impactful movement. Without the heart, a full appreciation for God's loving act of salvation in Jesus Christ cannot be fully known and appreciated. Without the heart, faith lacks relational depth.

But it is also true that without scriptural knowledge and understanding, faith lacks foundational depth. Knowing facts, understanding who God is and isn't because you have read and thought about scripture is extremely important in a relationship with God. After all, how can we say we love God, if we don't really know God? Jesus once said to his disciples, *"if you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free"* (John 8:31). Knowing God's word opens to us the opportunity for a deep and honest relationship with God. A close and enduring love relationship with anyone develops only as we spend time with and get to know that person better. Knowing facts, understanding the truth is foundational to a strong, enduring relationship. In a day when half-truths, false facts and propaganda are freely repeated and broadly circulated as truth, knowing what is accurate and true is critically important. Knowing scripture is how we base our relationship with God on truth instead of the hearsay of falsehoods.

Both heart and head are essential components of our faith. When both are actively engaged, that's when faith becomes a transformational power that changes us and then through us enters the world to change it. So today, I invite you to consider the balance of heart and head.

When it comes to your faith, how are you engaging your mind by acquiring facts and so growing in knowledge? Are you reading the Bible, are you participating in a Bible study, are you allowing God's preached word on Sunday morning to engage, challenge and inspire you? After considering that, then consider the ways in which your heart is engaged in acts of loving God and loving others? Do you take time to connect with God through prayer and meditation practices that draw you into God's presence and allow you to hear God speaking to you? In what ways are you loving and caring for others knowing that such acts of love are also expressions of our love for God?

The Christian faith is a "both/and" faith. And today's "both/and" challenge invites each one of us to embrace the importance of both our heart and our head when it comes to our personal relationship with God and our living a life of faith after the example of Jesus in the world. Let us each consider our personal heart and head balance, and then do what needs to be done to create a better balance. Amen.