

FROM THE PASTOR'S DESK

Dear Parishioners,

According to the American Heart Association, heart disease is the number one cause of death in America. And so our doctors and other health care professionals rightly encourage us to take care of our hearts by watching our diets, getting exercise and having regular check-ups. All three of our Scripture readings this Sunday speak to us about what is necessary for our hearts to be healthy spiritually.

Whether we are speaking about our physical hearts or our spiritual hearts, the first thing to note is that we cannot judge our health by outside appearances. We may appear to be in good shape physically while our hearts are actually blocked and damaged. Likewise, as Jesus tells the Pharisees in the Gospel today, the fact that we may perform our religious duties doesn't necessarily mean that our hearts are the way they should be.

So how can we know if our physical hearts are healthy? In order to evaluate our physical hearts doctors have a number of tests to see if our hearts are functioning correctly. By taking our pulse, measuring our blood pressure and other various tests, doctors can tell if our hearts are doing what they are supposed to do which is to pump blood to all the other parts of the body.

When it comes to our spiritual hearts and determining if they are functioning correctly, the Lord has provided us with a number of ways of evaluating them. First of all, as Moses tells us in today's first reading, God has given us His commandments. Then in our Gospel reading our Lord Jesus warns about spiritual heart disease. Jesus tells us that in order for God's word to take root in our hearts, we must purify them of all that is impure and unholy. Jesus says: "From within people, from their hearts, come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly." All these evils come from within us and we must overcome them if the word of God is to take root within us.

Often times people will talk about the Lord's commandments as if they are a burdensome list of rules that spoil our fun by restricting our behavior. It is true that the Commandments put limits on what we should and should not do. But, as Moses says, we should rejoice that the Lord is so close to us that He has given us His commandments. Through the commandments the Lord has given us the basic prescription is for living happy, healthy and holy lives.

How are we to fill this prescription? Well think about what we are told to do to fight physical heart disease. We are told to control our diets, get exercise and have regular check-ups. It is the same with our spiritual hearts. We should have a regular diet of prayer;

Holy Communion and reflection on the word of God in order to keep our hearts clean and focused on things that are holy. At the same time we should stay away from things that feed on our weaknesses and poison our hearts, like all the unchastity, greed and deceit in the society that surrounds us.

In addition to resisting these sinful inclinations, we need to exercise our hearts by reaching out to those around us who are suffering, weak and vulnerable. Such acts of charity as St. James says in today's second reading make for pure worship before God our Father.

Another key element in keeping our spiritual hearts healthy is to subject them to regular check-ups by examining our consciences daily and by coming to Confession frequently. Our lives are all about our relationships, our relationships with the Lord, with the people He has put closest to us for us to love and with people in general. And as the followers of Christ we should be constantly asking ourselves, "Where is my heart in relationship with the Lord? Or with this person or that one? Do my thoughts words and actions show the love I am called to have for them?"

Finally, we need to pray each day. We should pray for greater humility, charity, chastity and gratitude. If we grow strong in these virtues we will not succumb to the worst diseases of the heart.

Jesus Christ is of course our model. In the Sacred Heart of Jesus we see what it means to have a healthy & holy heart. We should sincerely ask Him that our hearts will become like His. In fact, there is a traditional prayer of thanksgiving that Catholics pray after receiving Jesus in the Holy Eucharist that says exactly that. Many of you, I am sure know it. It is printed below.

Now it can be hard to motivate ourselves to do what is necessary to preserve our physical health, to take care our hearts. Perhaps one of the reasons for this is that we all know that no matter how much we control our diet and exercise, sooner or later, our hearts will stop. We may be tempted to think that it really doesn't matter. But while our physical death is inevitable, eternal life is not. Whether we share in the resurrection promised at our Baptism depends on what we do here and now to welcome Jesus Christ into our hearts. At the end, when our hearts do stop beating, it will mean all the difference in the world.

With my prayers,

Fr. Conley