Sunday, May 5, 1991
HOW TO HAVE A HEALTHY HEART
Matthew 6:16-21

Last year, there was a six-page special advertising section in TIME magazine that particularly caught my attention, so I saved it and put it in my sermon illustration file. The headline of the six-page spread was — TAKING GOOD CARE OF YOUR HEART.

The first paragraph read: "As a nation of busy people, we are becoming aware of the need to take control of our personal health. We are trying to exercise more, keep the weight off, get our cholesterol levels checked, and take time out for fun and relaxation. And while many Americans have taken strong steps in this direction, we could be doing much better to improve our chances of living out healthy lives."

The ad went on to say—"Today, coronary heart disease remains the No. 1 killer: 67 million Americans have heart disease, and almost a million will die of it this year. But something can be done to help change these statistics. The 1988 U.S. Surgeon General's report reveals that the heart disease death rate could be lowered dramatically if all Americans made some changes in their living habits."

Some of the living habits we need to change, according to the ad, are practices most of us know about — proper diet, regular exercise, and handling stress in the right way.

However, the six-page ad left out one very important positive living habit that also has a strong effect on maintaining a healthy heart. That habit is — regular church attendance. According to Dr. David Larson, a research psychiatrist who has been studying how to maintain a healthy heart, regular church attendance is very important. In a study of a large group of men, he found that those who were free of cardiovascular disease and hypertension were those who attended church regularly and considered religion important. On the other hand, those individuals who did not consider religion important and had low attendance at worship were much more likely to have cardiovascular disease and hypertension.

Even more surprising, according to Dr. Larson, even those men who had little interest in religion but attended church because of family or community obligations had lower blood pressures than men with low interest in religion who did not attend church regularly. "For the sake of your heart," concluded Dr. Larson, "you should go to church even if you don't like it." Dr. Larson went on to say that clinical health professionals don't pay enough attention to the importance of the practice of good religion, especially worship attendance and its impact on overall health.

What many people don't know is that long before the American Heart Association was formed, long before America was discovered, there was concern for the human heart. The Old and New Testaments refer to the importance of a healthy heart. The heart was understood by the Hebrews and later by the followers of Jesus as the ultimate source of physical, emotional (today we'd say psychological), and spiritual energies.

The Bible reminds us that within the recesses of the heart dwell thoughts, plans, attitudes, fears, and hopes, which determine the character of the individual. It is through the "heart" that individuals are aware of God's contact with them. It is through the "heart" that God works to

transform people by implanting new thoughts, new attitudes, new hopes, and new ways of living.

The Biblical writers and Jesus thought of the “heart” as being more than a physical organ that pumps blood through our bodies. The heart was also a metaphor for the center of the person, the soul.

For the people of Jesus’ day, and before and after, the heart was the point of contact with God. The Bible says that when Mary watched the angels, shepherds, and the Wise Men come to see the baby Jesus in Bethlehem, she “pondered all these things in her heart.” Similarly, when people refused to pay attention to God, Jesus described them as having “hardened hearts.” Jesus probably also described stingy people as having hardened hearts.

We also use the word “heart” as a metaphor. We talk about God’s point of contact with us as being through the “heart” as well as through our intellect. We are reminded that having a “receptive heart” is the beginning of a life lived in the Spirit in which we reflect in our lives the love of God we experience in Jesus. And now we know that it’s more than a metaphor. A life lived in the Spirit actually contributes to having a healthy heart.

Now we can understand what Jesus meant when he said, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” However, many people reading or hearing what Jesus said tend to reverse the saying. They think Jesus had it all wrong. They believe that what Jesus meant to say was, “Where your heart is, there will your treasure be also.” They argue, “After all, isn’t it true that when we get interested in a particular cause or concern, then our treasure (our time, energy, and money) will follow?”

So we come to believe that if we can only get people involved in Sunday worship or some other church activity, then their treasure will follow. In other words, one’s treasure will follow one’s heart. But Jesus didn’t say it that way. He said, where we put our treasure is where our real commitment lies. If you don’t believe this, then go out and purchase some stock, and the next morning when the paper arrives, you will not turn to the sports page or comics first — but without more than a quick glance at the headlines, you will turn to the stock market report to see how your investment is doing. “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

Where we put our money not only reflects our values, it also shapes our commitments. So if you want to have a healthy heart, both physically and spiritually, then you need to be a generous giver to your church, as well as a regular participant in worship on Sunday mornings. “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” There are individuals who are very much involved in the life of the church, but as we say, “their heart is not in it.” That’s because they are not giving any of their money, or only a small proportion of it, for the work of the church.

The fact is that many people put too much of their treasure in unhealthy places and endeavors and therefore have unhealthy hearts because where you put your treasure, there will your heart be also. On the other hand, when you put your money in life-giving, healthy places, then it follows that you will have a healthy heart.

The fastest-growing congregation in the United Church of Christ is Trinity Church in Chicago. Its membership is made up mostly of Black people from all walks of life, from very poor people on welfare to professional people who are making large salaries. The congregation has grown

from a few hundred members in the 1960s to over 4,500 members in 1991, and it continues to grow.

The Senior Minister, Jeremiah Wright, is now in his 20th year there and has become one of my personal friends. He told me that one of the major turning points in that congregation's life took place about 10 years ago when the church decided to take seriously Jesus' words that where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. Here's what happened. They decided that when any member was elected to any office in the congregation or became a member of any church board or committee, that member had six months in which to become a tither, that is, to begin giving 10% of his or her income for the work of that church or resign from the office, committee, or board. Incidentally, people who are tithers, no matter how small or how large their income, always have enough money for all the necessities of life.

You can be sure that the congregation's elected and appointed leaders are dedicated because their hearts follow where they have put their treasure. Since that decision was made about 10 years ago, that congregation has a whole new spirit and energy.

Today, in this congregation, you have the opportunity to strengthen and grow a healthier heart and at the same time help strengthen and expand the ministries of this church among our own members and in the wider community as well. You can do all of this by becoming a generous contributor to our BUILDING ON THE VISION project.

The question most often asked of me about giving and the church is, "How much should I give?" Most of you have heard my standard answer to this question. I call it the C P R of giving because it will grow a healthier heart within you and because it's the pattern of giving suggested by the Bible. There are those who need C P R applied to their giving habits.

The C P R of giving is this: we are to give cheerfully, proportionately, and regularly.

The C stands for cheerful. The Bible says, "God loves a cheerful giver." The fact is that we all love cheerful givers. You don't want a gift from someone who is unhappy about giving the gift to you. If you are not a cheerful giver, it usually means you are not giving enough. Stingy people are not happy people. The most cheerful and happy people I know are giving people. How much should I give? If you are not cheerful about your giving to the church, it means you are not giving enough.

In the C P R of giving, the P stands for "proportionate giving." Those who have more are to give more. In Jesus' time, the suggested proportion of giving was 10% of one's income. Many Christians today still follow that guideline. In fact, in our family, that is our standard. What I suggest to people is that you consider in your situation what percentage of your income you would feel most cheerful about giving to the church and then to begin systematic and proportionate giving.

It also helps us to determine how much we should be giving when we compare our giving to what we spend on other things in our lives. There are many individuals who will spend $15,000 to $20,000 on an automobile and at the same time appear shocked when asked to consider a $10,000 gift, which is tax-deductible, to the church. People will spend twenty to thirty dollars or more going out to eat, but yet seem to think that putting a $5.00 or $10.00 bill in the offering plate is a large donation. When the Bible talks about proportionate giving, it means to take into account what we are spending on other things in our life in comparison to what we give to the church.

The R in the C P R of giving stands for “regularly.” We are to give cheerfully, proportionately, and regularly. Regular giving as a spiritual exercise makes for a healthy heart in the same way that regular physical exercise strengthens one’s heart in other ways.

This is a congregation with a strong heart, so strong that it has stayed vitally alive for 125 years. The heart of this church has remained strong because it is a giving congregation. Your gifts and mine will keep this church vibrant and alive, and at the same time, we will be strengthening our own hearts as together we build on the vision. Amen.