

## Stewardship Means... Good Circulation

Daniel 5:23

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*“You have praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood, and stone, which do not see or hear or know; but the God in whose power is your very breath, and to whom belong all your ways, you have not honored.”*  
Daniel 5:23b

Most days my husband Jeffrey and I go for walks together in our neighborhood. We have a nice 3-mile loop that we go on with our golden retriever Sophia. We walk and talk. But a couple times a week I say to Jeffrey, “Today I’m going to go by myself on the other route up the hill. I want to get my heart rate up. Get my heart pumping.” And that’s what I do. I walk fast to the path that puts me on a steep hill behind our house. I really can’t walk straight up so I make my own switch back. I feel my heart pumping. I’m breathing hard, it’s challenging. So I’ve been thinking about that experience of my heart pumping, blood flowing and how grateful I am for those experiences of my body working hard and exercising. I know I often take for granted my beating heart whether it is at the resting heart rate or exercise rate.

It reminded me of a sermon I heard a few years ago by Tom Troeger. The sermon begins in this way.

It was a loud sound.

But it was persistent.

Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang.

I figured it was a noisy forced air heating vent.

Or maybe some construction work.

But having just awakened from the anesthetic,

I wanted it to stop.

Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang. Bang.

“Oh Lord,” I prayed in desperation,

“Shut that thing off.”

Then I realized it was my new artificial heart valve

the surgeon had implanted.

“Cancel that prayer, God!”

The doctor had warned me before the operation:

“It’ll sound awfully loud at first until you get used to it.”

Ever since I first heard that sound,

I have awakened each morning to pray:

“Thank you God my heart is beating.”

The human heart is about the size of a human fist.

I invite you to lift up one of your hands and make a fist.  
Release it.  
Clinch it.  
Release it.  
Clinch it.  
Keep doing that for a moment while I speak.  
The heart beats about sixty or seventy times a minute.  
That means roughly 4,000 beats per hour.  
So in an eight-hour night  
your heart might be thirty-two thousand times!

Your hand and forearm may be getting tired  
from closing and opening your fist.  
So stop and think about this:  
your last night while you were sleeping,  
your heart –  
without any conscious effort from you –  
kept beating without a pause.

And those thirty-two thousand pulse beats  
sustained you only for a single night.  
By the end of the week –  
if we figure the much faster pulse rate of  
walking up stairs or biking or walking faster -  
you might be up to a million beats.  
Add up the weeks to months and the months to your total number of years,  
and then add that sum to the sums of everyone in the congregation.  
That is vast number of heart beats. (1)

We may take our heart beating for granted. I have been thinking about the gift of a beating heart. One way to look at it is as an unearned mysterious gift. Every breathing, pulse feeding second of our life is a gift from that comes from Divine Love, Holy Mystery, God. This Divine gift of life, of extravagance to us exceeds every mortal thought of generosity.

We know that the physical heart pumps blood out to pump blood in. That's how the circulatory system works, and if the valves are the veins become clogged, then the heart and our circulation deteriorate.

It is a biological fact:  
circulation is essential to life.  
It is a spiritual fact:  
circulation is essential to life.

There is this essential balance of receiving and giving.  
Flowing in and flowing out.

What if we only receive? What if there is no outflow? If all we do is receive, then we become like King Belshazzar to whom Daniel declared, "You have praised the gods of silver and gold which do not see or hear or no; but the god in whose power is your very breath, and to whom belong all your ways, you have not honored." Daniel is speaking truth to power. It is a revelation about Belshazzar 's life. He is worshipping false gods, is a slave to greed and this will be his undoing.

At the core of our existence is an unending process of being gifted by the Holy One In whose power is our very breath. And too often we are oblivious to this gift of life. We are like Belshazzar. We cling to what we have and ignore the source of love and blessing.

We go about our lives oblivious to the one who ceaselessly lavishes us with the gift of life.

But when moments come when we have our life back after we thought we would lose it,  
Or when we hold a newborn in our arms,  
or when we behold beauty that leaves us speechless,  
or when the realization breaks upon us  
that the simplicity of breath and pulse are gifts from Holy Love,  
then our hearts are filled with gratitude  
and we become extravagant in our giving.  
We want to give more and more in response to gifts of life and purpose.  
When we live out of deep awareness and gratitude, it changes our priorities.

What if this year as we reconsider how we see our hearts? Our hearts pump blood so it flows through our body and is life-giving. How is our church like a heart? Experiences of being held in love, new insights, exploring challenging ethical and scientific questions, music that stirs our souls, acts of service and peacemaking – these flow into us and we are grateful. Then we seek to let that love and gratitude and commitment to flow outward into the community and world?

I wonder how these past 7 months have affected you. Are you seeing your priorities differently?

We see what we have and ask what can we do with it that will be life giving? We know in our bodies that if there is a blood clot and blood cannot freely flow, it is dangerous, even life-threatening. What if we are holding back and blocking some of the flow? What might need to shift? Money and resources are like the blood flowing. Flows into our lives and church and then we choose where it goes to bring life and make our community and world better.

Keeping blood circulating and flowing in the body brings health.

It also true of water.

Keeping water circulating and flowing brings health to ecosystems.

I want to close with a real life example.

The Sea of Galilee is a beautiful and full fresh water. It is fed from rain runoff from the mountains of Galilee and the Golan Heights. It is 695 feet below sea level and is five miles wide and thirteen miles long. It is better defined as a lake. The lake is only 150 feet deep at the deepest point. However, it is the main water source for all of Israel. It is filled by the Jordan River, which has its beginnings on Mt. Hermon, an often snowcapped peak at the north end of the land of Israel. The Jordan then flows out of the Sea of Galilee, down to Dead Sea. The Sea of Galilee is full of life all around it – green trees and plants sustain all types of living plants and creatures. Water flows in and water flows out.

In contrast is the Dead Sea. It is much larger than its northern counterpart. It is forty-eight miles long and eleven miles wide and reaches a depth of over 1000 feet. It is the lowest place on the face of the earth at 1300 feet below sea level. The Dead Sea is dead because it is so salty. Twenty-five percent of the water's contents are salts. The Dead Sea is so salty because it has no outlet.

The reason the Sea of Galilee is full of life because it has both an inflow and an outflow. It both receives and gives. The Dead Sea, however, only receives and never gives. There is no flow. (2)

What flows into your life that is life-giving?

Has this time of sheltering in place in the midst of a pandemic and economic downturn been an opportunity for you to reconsider your priorities?

What has flowed into your life through our church?

As you consider your priorities for inner spiritual life and your outer life of being in the world to make it better and loving our neighbors, how is our church part of that flow? There are many organizations asking for financial support. How might you see our church as in important community where money and resources flow in out of gratitude, hope and commitment and money, resources and leadership flow out to address needs in our community and world?

I invite you to prayerfully consider these questions as you make a financial pledge to our church.

May we be a people of gratitude who are grateful for our beating hearts.

May we be a community of faith whose hearts break for all places where injustice and poverty rob people of health and life.

May we be a gathering of people who follow the ways of Jesus as we seek to have hearts of compassion, shalom, justice and love, and create a flow of help and hope to our neighbors near and far. Amen.

- 1) Thomas Troeger, "Good Circulation," 1997. Featured in *Speaking of Stewardship: Model Sermons on Money and Possessions*, William Carter, editor. 1998 Homiletical Feast
- 2) "Difference between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea," posted 6/27/17 Nature's Eye <http://naomispenny.blogspot.com/2016/06/difference-between-sea-of-galilee-and.html#.X5T9zYhKjIU>