

# The Practice of Heart Health

Sermon by Pastor Patricia Geiseman  
Ash Wednesday  
March 6, 2019  
Psalm 51:1-12

When I was six years old, I learned about the seriousness of a heart attack. My grandfather, my mother's father, keeled over and died on the living room floor on his way to eat a slice of newly baked pie. He was 58 years old. The year was 1960. We know more now than we did then. My grandfather smoked Camel Straights. He ate whatever he felt like, didn't exercise, and his own father died early. There were risk factors.

In the almost sixty years since then, there has been much research and progress related to heart health. Still, as you know, heart disease is the most deadly disease in the U.S., responsible for 1 in 4 deaths. The Center for Disease Control reports that approximately 610,000 persons die every year. Our age, race, ethnicity, family history, and daily lifestyle behaviors all contribute to our risk.

A funeral director in Elgin with whom I used to work a lot once told me, "It's all about the vessels. If they stay open and blood flows, life goes on. If they don't, that's it."

We are becoming increasingly aware that heart disease is the number one health risk for men *and* for women. And because of this, we learn what we can do to decrease our risks and increase our health. We know that our lifestyle can help our heart: eating the right foods, exercising, watching our weight, and learning to relax. All these can make a difference.

Ancient people thought a lot about heart health, too. They certainly did not know what we know. They knew nothing of stents, cholesterol, ablation, angioplasty, bypass surgery, or blood pressure. Even so, they knew about the heart. For the biblical writers, the heart was more than an organ that pumps blood; the heart was the innermost spring of the individual life.

For the Psalmists and other writers, the heart was the totality of feeling, thoughts, and desires of a person. It was the seat of the emotions and intellect, the point of contact with God. In a way, we can say that for people of Bible times, the heart was a person's personality, their spirit, their true self. The heart is the deepest part of ourselves.

The Bible tells us that hearts can melt, fail, tremble, throb, be sick, and get broken. We know what this means.

Still, our hearts, melt, tremble, and break.

Our hearts, like those of people before us, can be glad, troubled, courageous, discouraged, fearful, envious, trustful, generous, moved by hatred or love. Hearts can be warm or cold.

On this Ash Wednesday, we move into a new season of the church year. Since the fourth century, Lent has been a time of conscious participation in the practice of faith. This is a good time to focus on “heart health.”

Every year on this day, we read from Psalm 51, a penitential psalm, a psalm of “disorientation.” According to an old tradition, this psalm was written by the great King David after being confronted by the prophet Nathan about his acts of deceit, adultery, and murder involving Bathsheba and her husband, Uriah.

“Create in me a clean heart, O God and renew a right spirit with in me.” (Psalm 51:10)

“Create in me a clean heart, O God ...”

Here the great king offers himself to God, broken and contrite. He is holding out hope that God will make what is broken, wholly new.

From the devastation of his guilt, shame, and grief the powerful king admits he needs God’s healing help. He hopes in God’s salvation.

The ashes on our foreheads remind us that we, like King David, are human. We are part of creation. We have, and will, make choices that hurt others and ourselves. We will misuse our power, or not claim what is ours. Even those of us who have heard God’s Word and have learned God’s purpose struggle to see and to do it.

But the ashes on our heads are traced in the sign of the cross.

We remember that even though we are part of creation, we are claimed by God as sons and daughters. We are infused with power and purpose.

In Baptism we are sealed with the Spirit, the power of God that makes us new. The ashen cross reminds us not that we are doomed, but that we are loved!

Ash Wednesday is a new beginning, not so much a sad day as a hopeful one.

We, too, hold out hope that God will make what is broken or hurting in us new and strong and whole.

Over the years together with this congregation, I have listened to your stories of heart complications, and I have learned what can go wrong. You have suffered with AFib, blockages, and arrhythmia. The congregation has prayed for you!

The progress in medical treatments is astounding. You have benefited from stents, bypass surgery, cardioversion, ablation, and pacemakers. Many of you here are walking miracles!

Even if we haven't participated in rehab, we know that we keep our heart healthy by eating nutritious food and by exercising. We keep our heart, our whole selves, healthy by being open and responsive to the healing God offers.

There are certain exercises we do help this healing. Like the great King David, we exercise our heart by confession. Confession is pouring out our sadness, anger, confusion, disappointment, failure, and frustration to God.

In our confession, we ask for forgiveness, a new start, a clean heart.

We need the healing hope God offers.

In this exercise we ask for God's forgiveness, for the newness and light God promises. The forgiveness we receive we can share.

Forgiveness is good for your heart! In a study, 71 people mentally relived hurtful memories, adding two alternative endings: harboring a grudge and forgiving. They thought about friends, romantic partners, parents, or siblings. Common offenses included betrayal of trust, rejection, lies, and insults. The researchers measured their heart rates, blood pressures, and perspiration and asked about their emotions.

The results: Heart rates and blood pressures were two-and-a-half times lower when participants forgave than when they held a grudge. Holding a grudge made them sweat—a sign that their nervous systems were in high alert. Forgiveness left them feeling calm and in control. The professor who led the study wrote,

Participants felt significantly more negative, angry and sad during the unforgiving condition than the forgiving condition ... We know that sustained anger and hostility are risk factors for heart diseases. Forgiveness may be a powerful antidote to hostility. If people become forgiving, there can be accumulating health benefits. [1]

One writer suggests that there are five health benefits of forgiveness:

1. Lowers stress levels...cortisol is decreased
2. Empathy lowers our heart rates. Why hold on to anger when it will make your heart do more work than it needs to do?
3. Lower pain...there is a relationship between chronic pain and forgiveness...
4. Lowers blood pressure...letting go of anger that we may be harboring,
5. Grudges can shorten our lives! "Forgive and live!" [2]

Over and over again, the Bible tells of God's showing up in human history. And the change this divine intervention brought.

In the ministry of Jesus, we see the compassion of God offering healing, restoration, forgiveness, and newness.

Lent urges us to practice HEART HEALTH, to remember the God loves and cares for our whole selves, our body, mind, and spirit.

So, this Lenten season we enter the wilderness, a space for intentional reflection, openness and honesty, confession and release. We pray, let go, and make space for the wellbeing that we need. And when we let go, we find there is room for compassion for others.

This season, together we will share time and troubles, risk factors and resources. We will provide microloans to women in distant places so that the economy of entire villages is improved.

Our children will do extra chores and bring in offerings here and at the Child Development Center to buy fruit trees. An apple a day... can keep the doctor away. And mangos can grow in dry places!

We will work together to improve the heart health of our lives and communities as we care for each other.

What we practice we become.

Together we trust that the God of Steadfast Love still works among us to create clean hearts and renew right spirits.

Amen.

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#### Resources

[1] Harrar, S., "How Grudges Hurt You," *Prevention*, February 2002, p. 38.

[2] Nickalls, Sammy. "Let It Go...For Your Own Sake: 5 Health Benefits Of Forgiveness," *inspyr.com*, October 11, 2013.

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