

Putting Your Heart Into It

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



Mark 10:17-31

It was a Sunday morning. I was six years old. My father and two brothers and I sat at the breakfast table eating our breakfast lovingly prepared by my mother. As we ate though we noticed from the kitchen the sound of agitation. Mother was cleaning up and pots were banging a little loudly. Cabinets were being closed with a little more force. All of sudden my father looked at us and said, “Oh my God, it’s Mother’s Day.” We had forgotten. Thinking quickly, my father whispered – “Don’t say a word, I think the florist down the street is open. I’ll run and get something and we’ll give it to her and it will be fine.” But by now it wasn’t going to be fine. Within minutes father was back and by this time mother had gone upstairs to get ready for church. Turning to me the youngest, he handed me the corsage he had purchased and said, “Go upstairs and give this to your mother and tell her “Happy Mother’s Day.” So little six year old me walked up the stairs, found mother in the bedroom, extended the corsage to her and said, “Happy Mother’s Day, Mom.” Her reply was, “Too late. I don’t want it.” So I turned around and walked back down the stairs to my father who waiting there at the bottom of the stairs, handed the corsage to him and said, “She doesn’t want it.” And in a voice that could unfortunately be heard at the top of the stairs where my mother was eavesdropping, my father said, “Ah put it in the refrigerator, she’ll get over it.” Not good. Off my father ran to go get ready for church. He was the pastor of the church in the middle of town. An hour later when Mrs. McConnell and her three sons arrived at church, sans corsage, my brothers and

I did as we always did and made for the pastor’s family pew. This church had a pastor’s family pew. But before we started down the aisle, my mother said, “Oh no, we’re not sitting there. Upstairs boys, we’re sitting in the balcony.” So there the pastor’s wife, the only mother in the church it appeared without any floral adornment, sat with her family in the back row of the balcony as far away from their assigned seat as possible. And so now the entire congregation of Highland Presbyterian Church knew that there was trouble in McConnell city. I don’t think anyone listened to a word my father said that morning – and I think everyone had the McConnell family for lunch that afternoon.

Fast forward five weeks to Father’s Day. Same breakfast table. But the scene a little different. Beside my father sat a stack of gifts. A stack of gifts. Mother on our behalf had buried him in ties and shirts and sweaters. An embarrassment of riches. With every gift he opened Father got further and further the point. But he didn’t completely get the point until he opened the last gift and found inside the box the dead corsage!

Sometimes it takes a date on the calendar, a particular day, a particular season – to grab our attention and force us into an inventory of what we really think and really feel.

Today is one of those days. Valentine’s Day. Most of us knew that coming in – that it’s Valentine’s Day. Those of us who didn’t remember, are now thinking very quickly about what they are going to do to remedy their oversight. But Valentine’s Day, like Mother’s Day and Father’s Day or Christmas or birthdays – is one of those days on the calendar that grabs our attention and forces us into an inventory of what we really think and feel. Valentine’s Day, if it is to be anything more than a high profit day for Hallmark and the local florist, could be one of those days that make us wonder where our hearts are. Could be. But often not. Often days like today are

days when we hunt around for the obligatory gesture – the customary corsage-- that indicates that I at least remembered and that you are on my list and that my heart is with you. And here is the Walgreen’s card and the Publix flowers to prove it.

But times like these could be much more. And sometimes is. Sometimes days like today are days when we take the bait and ask the raw and honest question of ourselves – where really is my heart? I don’t know about you, but it’s really not a question I really want to ask myself. At least not seriously. I really don’t want to dig deep down past the little tokens and search my soul and get to the bottom of it to find out where really is my heart. I don’t know about you, but I can talk a big game and I convince myself that my heart is really here and really there – but in all practicality it really is there and it really is here. Why just a check on my calendar and check book can be a wake-up call to where my heart really is.

“Sometimes days like today are days when we take the bait and ask the raw and honest question of ourselves – where really is my heart?”

Don’t you wonder if that isn’t what was happening when Jesus and this man were having their conversation? I doubt it was any special day on the calendar. No date to warn the man that he had an inventory to make. And maybe it was just as well. He didn’t really have time to prepare his defense or to come up with his rationalizations for his heart – he just heard that the rabbi was in town and many

had been talking of him. And because perhaps he had had this nagging question dogging him – this question about eternity, eternal life, he figured now was the time to ask. So Mark tells us that he ran to the rabbi and knelt before him and asked his question, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” And Jesus in his response leads him through a recitation of the commandments – the Ten Commandments. You shall not kill. Check. You shall not commit adultery. Check. You shall not bear false witness. Check. You shall not steal. Check. Honor your father and your mother. Check. I’ve got all the rules right, Jesus. I am respectable. I am going through all the right motions. And Jesus says, You got that right.

But there is something about this guy that has made him ask his question. He knows he’s been following all the commandments. He has been going through all the motions. He has been bringing to God his Hallmark card and Publix flowers. But still there

is something missing. Something isn’t yet there. If we are talking eternity – well then eternity must be something more than this. Who wants to think that eternal life is just getting the rules right. You’ve wondered, I imagine, the same?

You have I imagine a time or two in your life – maybe even now – when you’ve said to yourself, “Is this all

that there is?” I’ve worked hard. I’ve played by the rules. I showed up on time. I provided for my kids. I have money in my retirement account. I have a roof over my head. I drop a few bills in the plate. I play my rounds at the country club. But is this what it is all about? Is this eternity? Really? Is this the sign of things to come?

There’s something missing, the man says. And Jesus says, “Yeah, you’re right.” And Mark says Jesus loved him...loved him enough to say, what might it mean if you took all your stuff, you know all your stuff, and you put in on EBay and then took the money and gave it to the poor? You gave it to homeless kids in Sarasota. You gave it to the folks lined up at the Food Pantry. You gave it to migrant workers in Central Florida. You gave it to the Salvation Army. You gave it to refugees in Eastern Europe. What might that mean? What might that mean?

Now you don’t have to be a Biblical scholar to know that when Jesus wonders with him about this particular way into eternity that the man’s heart skipped a beat. Or maybe two or maybe ten. Mark says he was shocked. In the 21st century we would say that the defibrillator paddles had been put on his chest and Jesus yelled, clear! And the shock came – and the hope was that the kingdom cardiac rhythm had been implanted. It was Jesus way of saying to the man – yeah, you’ve been going through all the motions, yeah, you’ve been playing all the rules – but your heart isn’t into it. Your heart isn’t skipping a beat. Your breath isn’t being taken away. Let’s shock your heart. Let’s have you do something so way out there that your heart is thumping and you feel like you’re starting to hyperventilate.

It’s just Jesus’ way of asking the man, Where really is your heart? And the answer that the man avoids answering is that honest engine his heart really isn’t into it. If it is into anything, it is into the stuff. And what Jesus knows and what the man knows too ... is

that he can’t take the stuff with him.

Follow me, Jesus says. And the man says, But what about the stuff? And Jesus says, Follow me. And the man realizes it’s Valentine’s Day and he thought the corsage would do – but Jesus is talking about something much, much deeper. Something much more heart thumping.

When I wrote the first check for my daughter’s college tuition it took my breath away. I’m not sure I had written a bigger check. But I am not sure I had felt a greater joy, a deeper satisfaction. I was getting to provide for my daughter’s education. And my heart was so there. I could feel it pounding. Do you know what I am talking about? This wasn’t a greeting card, this was real. And it felt real. As did the next payment and the next payment for four years. And I will never see that money again, but when I saw that young woman in black gown and mortar board process down that aisle to pomp and circumstance I’ve never been happier about money that wasn’t in my hand. It went to where my heart was. And wasn’t that the joy that Jesus was trying to get the rich man to?

Not many of you know that tucked away on one of my bookshelves in my office is one of my secret treasures. One of my pride and joys. It’s what they call a collectible. A first edition copy of a C.S. Lewis book ... signed, no less, by the author. I don’t have many sentimental treasures aside from my Michigan wardrobe – but this is the thing for me. The thing. It’s wrapped in bubble wrap and seldom taken off the shelf and shown out of fear it might be mishandled. It’s worth a decent amount of money and holds an even greater sentimental value. But in the end it is a thing. It is a piece of stuff. And I sat in my office one day wondering about what this church is challenging me to do with the next chapter of this church’s life, this next great opportunity and all of a sudden my eyes locked onto this book. And I said, Oh no. Oh no. Not the book. And I felt my heart rate go up. And my

breaths grow deeper as I wondered if this needed be a part of my gift to this important next chapter in our church’s life. And then after a few days it dawned on me, Duh. Duh Steve. Didn’t Jesus say that where your treasure is there will your heart be also? Duh. My heart was on the shelf. Literally on the shelf. What a terrible place to leave your heart. My church has reminded me that it is Valentine’s Day – time to ask where your heart is and the truth is part of my heart has been on the shelf. And soon by God’s good grace it won’t be. And no gift I’ve ever given has felt better.

We’ve all heard the story about the father and son on their way to church and the father handed his son a quarter and a dime and told him that he could choose which one to put in the offering plate. So the time came for the offering and the plate came past the boy and the father out of the corner of his eye noticed the boy put into the plate the dime. After the service on and on their way home the father asked the son why he had chosen to put in the plate the dime? The boy replied, “Well, in the Bible it says the Lord loves a cheerful giver, and figured I would be a lot more cheerful if I put in the dime instead of the quarter.”

And if we were honest with ourselves we might find ourselves agreeing. But then this rabbi, this Messiah comes to town – and with all our wonderment about the meaning of life and what it is all about and is this all there is – he asks us the question, maybe the question we’d rather not be asked. Where is your heart anyway? And with it the shock. And with the shock ... perhaps, perhaps the joy!



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Church of the Palms

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