

## 8. Thin Places: Opening the Heart

These are the goal and means of transformation, the purpose and practice of Christian life.

### The Heart: A Metaphor for the Self

"Heart" in the Bible means more than how we usually use the word today. In the Bible it is a metaphor for the inner self as whole. Image for the self at a deep level, deeper than perception, intellect, emotion, and volition. As the center of us all, "heart" affects our sight, thought, feelings, and will.

### The Closed Heart

The heart, the self at its deepest level, can be turned toward (open to) God or away from (closed to) God. Usual human condition is a closed heart. Qualities of a closed heart:

- Blindness and limited vision go with a closed heart. Enclosed in our own world, we neither see nor hear very well.
- A closed heart affects the mind, the reasoning process itself. The heart does control the mind. "Rationalization": self-interestedness self-justification—heart deceives the mind, leading to lack of understanding and a darkened mind.
- A closed heart and bondage go together: we are often in bondage to the desiring of our own hearts.
- A closed heart lacks gratitude. Either feel self-made or bitter and cheated.
- A closed heart is insensitive to wonder and awe. Just ordinary world.
- A closed heart forgets God; it loses track of the Mystery always around us.
- A closed heart is in exile cut off from a larger reality. Separated and disconnected.
- A closed heart lacks compassion—unable to feel the feelings of others at a level deeper than one's head and act accordingly. Though it can be charitable, it does not feel the suffering of others.
- A closed heart is insensitive to injustice.

Why do we often have closed hearts? Result of bad childhood? For some, yes, but not all. The closed heart is the natural result of the process of growing up. We learn that we are separate from the world "out there".

<b>Severe form of hard heart</b>	<b>Milder form of hard heart</b>
Violence	Judgmentalism
Brutality	Insensitivity
Arrogance	Self-centeredness
Rapacious greed	Ordinary self-interest

Some days, some times in a day, our hearts are more open or more closed than other days or times. How do our hearts become open? The Spirit of God operating through thin places does it.

## Thin Places

God, "The More", is the encompassing Spirit in which everything is ("the one in whom we live and move and have our being")—God not somewhere else but "right here". Two layers of reality: the visible world of our ordinary experience and God, the sacred, Spirit. Occasionally, we do experience God shining through everything. Those moments and places are "thin places": where these two realities meet or intersect; where the veil momentarily lifts, and we behold God.

Thin places can be traditionally sacred physical locations (Jerusalem, Rome, Mecca, Iona, etc.) or anywhere our hearts are opened. Sacrament of the sacred, a means whereby the sacred becomes present to us. Other thin places: nature (esp. wilderness areas), the arts (music, poetry, dance, etc.); any place, activity or person (e.g., Jesus and saints) in which the boundary between one's self and the world momentarily disappears.

## Thin Places and Christian Practices

The central purpose of Christian practices is to become a thin place where our hearts are opened. Worship can be a thin place. God does not *need* praise. Worship is directed *to God*, but is in an important sense *for us*. Worship is about creating a thin place. Diverse ways of doing that!

The primary role and purpose of music in worship is to provide a thin place, whether it is listening to a choir or singing together with the rest of the congregation. If the congregation is to participate, choose hymns that are accessible to musically-challenged voices. Some contemporary and traditional hymns are wonderfully accessible and can therefore become a thin place. Some contemporary and traditional hymns are NOT.

Participation in sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist can become a thin place. Sermons can become thin places. The preaching of the Word is meant to become a thin place, a place where our hearts are opened.

The Bible can become a thin place in worship. When read well, the lectionary readings can become sacramental, as can biblical preaching.

Liturgical words (words that are a regular part of worship services, such as the Lord's Prayer and the creeds) can become thin places. Words we know "by heart" are spoken without having to "think hard" about their meaning, without making them an intellectual exercise, so that the speaking of them can become a thin place—where our whole self at the deepest level becomes open to the encompassing generous Spirit in whom we all live.

Affirming all of the things in the creeds as literally true propositions is impossible for a thoughtful modern person to do. But affirming those things is not why the creeds are said in the context of worship. The primary purpose of saying the creeds in worship is not propositional but sacramental: through these clunky words that stumble in the presence of Mystery, God is mediated. We join a community that transcends time and place—become part the communion of saints together in a thin place.

Liturgical, sacred times can become thin places. The festivals of Easter and Christmas can touch our hearts and not be simply about sentiment. In the midst of the longest nights of our winter, the light of the world is born. In the darkness of the tomb during the Easter Vigil a flood of light shines forth. During Advent we yearn for and prepare for the coming of the light. During Lent, we journey with Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem and participate in Holy Week with its inevitable climax of death and resurrection. These seasons become thin places.

Every thing that happens in worship should be present to enable us to become present to the Spirit of God. Individual practices can also become thin places. Prayer, especially prayer of internal silence, can become a thin place in which we sit in the presence of God: "Be still and know that I am God." Journaling, retreats, pilgrimage and fasting are other individual practices that can open our heart.

### **The Open Heart**

Characteristics of an open heart: opposite of the closed heart described above. We see more clearly when our hearts are open. We are alive to wonder, to the sheer marvel of "isness". The world is not ordinary. We feel a gratitude that swells in us, almost bursting us. We are compassionate and have a passion for justice. Both naturally flow from a heart that is open to God. They are the primary fruit of the Spirit. The purpose of the Christian life, of life in Christ, is to become more and more compassionate beings.

Christian devotion yearns for an open, new, transformed heart. The Christian life is about the Spirit of God opening our hearts in thin places. "Create in me a clean heart, O God. And renew a right spirit within me!"

### **Questions**

1. How is the word "heart" used in everyday conversation and how is that different from what the Bible means by "heart"?
2. What does Borg mean by a "thin place"?
3. What physical location or activity or person has been a thin place for you? Describe how it or he/she became a thin place for you and how you felt or feel.
4. What parts of worship service can become a thin place for you? What parts of worship service are a "thick place" for you?
5. What times, seasons, or festivals during the year are a time when you feel the sacred most strongly?
6. What individual practices (e.g., prayer, journaling, etc.) do you do to open your heart to the Spirit of God?
7. How would you know that you or another person had an open heart?