

Reaching For God: Different Ages, Different Calls

Head, Hands, and Heart

Today we begin a new sermon series: “Reaching For God: Different Ages, Different Calls”

From now until Lent, we will be looking at the questions we ask in our journey to the Divine, and how we may have different approaches that change at different stages of life. We will look at the various paths that bring us closer to knowing God, the questions we may ask at different times.

In January, we will be exploring the idea of mission, and will hear from our own “Kidz On A Mission,” and from Andrea Balliet, who will look at poverty in general, and local poverty, and who will pose the question: “Why Help?”

In February, we will look deeper into the inward disciplines of prayer and meditation as ways to draw us closer to God.

Today I will talk about “head, hands and heart.” This phrase is a shorthand term to describe human beings and the ways we learn and grow. All of us learn through thinking, acting, and feeling—head, hands, and heart—though, because we are all different from one another, each of our approaches will be a little different.

The phrase “head, hands and heart” is used in Waldorf education to reflect the need to teach the whole child, because we are beings of multiple intelligences. Some things we learn best intellectually, other skills, such as learning to knit or learning to play an instrument, require hands-on activity; and emotional intelligence

—traits such as cooperation, empathy, and leadership, also need to be developed.

Our Journey to the Light, our learning about God and how to serve the Creator, also requires our whole being. We all have a built-in motivation to understand our ultimate purpose, our place in the universe, our roles as sons and daughters of God, and we learn through our “heads”—our quest for knowledge; our “hands”—our actions in the world; and our “hearts”—our ability to experience compassion and devotion.

Now, for the fun of it, let’s jump several thousand miles around the world, and several thousand years into the past and reflect on the wisdom of the Ancients. The oldest of the major religions—Hinduism, which arose in India—has Sanskrit terms that correspond to “head, hands and heart,” and the Hindus say these terms describe the three major ways each of us, as our life unfolds, moves towards God. We may think of Hinduism as foreign and exotic, but remember that the essence of all religions is the same, and that we can learn from the best part of each religion. This was a stance that Gandhi took; though a lifelong Hindu, he was so moved by reading Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount that he kept a framed drawing of Jesus as a one of his few possessions. So we can look at these Hindu terms, and reflect how they might apply to us as Christians.

The first term, “Jnana Yoga” describes a yoga of the mind or intellect. The word “yoga” makes us first think of the familiar “Hatha Yoga,”—the discipline involving physical postures—but the broader meaning of “yoga” is to “yoke” or achieve union with God. Jnana Yoga uses the intellect to move past the intellect. For us Christians, this path might mean

engaging in Bible Study and reading other spiritual writings, listening to sermons, exploring the teachings of history's wisest souls, contemplating life's deepest truths. The Hindus believe that though God cannot be fully comprehended by the intellect, focused study of the Wisdom of the Ages can point the way our journey may proceed.

The Hindu path that corresponds to "hands" is called Karma Yoga. You've heard the word "karma" as in the "Law of Karma:" scientists would say "for every action there is a reaction;" for example, if we do good, we will receive good. Karma Yoga is simply the Yoga of Action: every time we act selflessly, we grow closer to God. Action done for the benefit of others is God's work, and is said to purify the mind. We might call this "service to others," or Mission work; truly, any unselfish deed qualifies as Karma Yoga.

The third path, the path of the heart, is called "Bhakti Yoga," the Yoga of Devotion. In Hinduism that may involve devotion to a personal God, one of the many manifestations of the Infinite God, Brahman. In Christianity it is the love we have for Jesus; in some denominations, devotion is also accorded Mary and other saints. Basically, any spiritual practice that opens and strengthens a loving heart falls into this category.

Head, hands, and heart: depending on our personalities, our spiritual journey will follow these paths in different proportions. All three paths will speak to us, but one path may give a stronger call. Some of us love the life-long learning that Philosophy and Theology provide. Some of us appreciate how True Religion talks directly to the heart, bypassing words. Some of us just like to roll up our sleeves, and get to work—thinking of others, not

ourselves. All three of these paths lead to God.

As each person's journey toward God varies from another's, so our calls along these paths will also vary over the course of our lifetimes, too. Typically, a child's first call from God is through the heart. Though a young one's intellectual capabilities may still be undeveloped, a child has an openness of heart that perceives God's love instantly, which is why Jesus reminds us to come unto Him like a child, as we sing in our song each Sunday. As he chastened his Disciples: "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." [Matthew 18:3] The heart component, as Jesus emphasized, is essential to divine understanding.

In his own life, we see that Jesus was already contemplating Life's profoundest questions by the age of twelve; witness His give-and-take with the wisest Rabbis in the Temple on his family's visit to Jerusalem. This is the "head" of "head, hands and heart." Separated from his parents, "after three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers." [Luke 2:46-47] Engaging the mind in pursuit of his spiritual goals came naturally to our Lord, who thoroughly knew the Scriptures, and interpreted them for others with a profound understanding

And, of course, over and over again, we observe Jesus as an adult putting love into action when healing the sick, feeding the hungry, teaching those thirsty for spiritual knowledge. Not just words, not just feelings, but actions showed how attuned Jesus was to the will of His Father.

Finally, let's look for a moment at the story that was today's second Scripture reading. A teacher of the law asks Jesus: of all the commandments, which is the most important. This story concisely reflects the "head, hands, and heart" template describing our path to God. The "head" is involved by pondering the question of our life's purpose and what God asks of us, by asking the Master to share his wisdom, by studying the Scriptures for answers. Jesus draws His response from passages in the "Torah," the Law of Moses: the Greatest Commandment is

to fully love God, which is the path of the heart;

and to lovingly serve our brothers and sisters, which is to act as the hands of God.

Head, hands, and heart: no matter our personality or our stage of life, God has provided us the ways to grow closer to the Divine. Our intellect, our devotion, our selfless actions—each of these paths, or any combination of them, will lead us forward. There is always a "next step" available to us in our journey to the Light, and remember, the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.

Amen.