

Talking from the heart, seeing from the heart

Lessons from the Sermon on the Mount—and my dog

Will Streeter

Dogs say so much, yet they don't use words. They talk with their bodies—and if we're around them much, we know exactly what they're saying. Humans aren't so different. Some researchers estimate that as much as 90 percent of what we "say" is nonverbal. Babies are experts at expressing themselves without words, and we parents become just as good at interpreting. We call it "talking from the heart," these messages that are so simple yet say the most. Dogs, young children, and some adults are really good at this talking without talking.

During repeated readings of the Sermon on the Mount, I kept thinking that these three chapters (Matthew 5–7) are telling us to stop talking so much with words and start letting our hearts rule

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what we say. *Let your yes be yes, your no be no. Love your enemies. Give, pray, fast in secret. No babbling prayers like the pagans do. Forgive others. Take the log out of your own eye. By your fruits you will be recognized.* Doing these things takes very few words. The language of the heart is where truth is expressed and lived.

So if we are speaking from the heart, is it possible to see from the heart? It seems that Jesus is saying: Speak from the heart, and then start seeing from the heart. What can this mean? My dog watches me with anticipation and excitement, waiting to see what's going to happen next. He's ready. He looks at things as if they had potential to be more than what they seem. He looks at me, wondering what I'm going to ask of him, hoping that perhaps what we do will be even more exciting than the last time.

Children are experts at seeing this way, too. They look at parents, teachers, coaches, and friends with anticipation about

what new piece of knowledge, what new skill, what adventure is coming. I believe they are looking at us hoping that we have potential to be for them more than we presently seem to be. Their constant questioning suggests that they view us as unlimited sources of knowledge.

This way of seeing—with anticipation and a sense of unlimited potential—is what Jesus is asking of us in Matthew 5–7. *Don't resist the evil person. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. Give your coat, and your shirt too. Go the extra mile. Give to the one who asks, and don't turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.*

How can we freely, joyfully, eagerly do any of these things if we aren't looking at others with anticipation—anticipation that maybe we are underestimating their potential? Maybe they will surprise us and become more than they presently appear to be! Isn't it great when you go the extra mile and find that it softens the other, that you have made a new friend? Talking from the heart, seeing from the heart: I think this is part of the mysterious language of the Sermon on the Mount that leads us to a new way of being, really being.

I like to think of God as a master gardener who plants us into this world. When I plant seeds in my garden, I'll go to great lengths to keep them growing. I have a picture, either in my head or from the seed package, of what these seeds can become, and I'll do all I can within reason to get the plants that emerge to reach their full potential. God plants us and I think maybe sees us in a way that's a little like how we see our vegetables. Except the stakes are higher. We're not plants; we have a heart and soul that are worth going the extra mile for.

We live in a world where we give most everything a monetary value. To get special attention, good products, good *anything*, you have to pay. If you can't pay, you get things and services that no extra inch (much less an extra mile!) was put into the making of. We're living in houses with no heart, filling them up with things that weren't made with any heart, for which no one went an extra mile. We don't even know who made the things we touch and look at all day, every day. Why do we cherish those few things that we know were made with heart? Because we know the effort that went into them. And the funny thing is, we usually have paid

no money for those items. They're gifts from one heart to another.

We need a new way of tending to the garden, one in which we know our hearts are being cared for, in which value is connected to how many extra miles went into a thing's creation, and in which those things are affordable for all. A life of striving for money lacks creativity, it lacks passion, and it lacks compassion. Obsession with money is killing our hearts. Walking the extra mile would be good for us, body and soul. *For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. You cannot serve God and money.*

Our native ability to talk and see with the heart gets sidetracked during the growing-up process. We get preoccupied with other matters as we move into adulthood. Stuff happens—family trouble, accidents, natural disasters, victimization, job loss, failure, premature death. We are left feeling that we have something to overcome. A wound. Most of us get busy tending this wound, trying to fill the void it has left. As Richard Rohr says, we launch

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into trying to fix, understand, and control this part of our life that we don't have a handle on.¹

The wound I've spent the last twenty-five years trying to manage, fix, control, and understand is my relationship with my father and its lingering aftershocks. My father, unlike the good parent who gives good gifts (bread) to his children, gave me stones. They felt like emotional boulders being hurled at me:

immorality, financial irresponsibility, emotional abuse. I devoted my life to trying to fill the wounds this relationship left me with: with education, adventure, travel, and—for the last twenty or so years—hard work. I've been trying to make a respectable life out of a childhood filled with shame and disappointment. A big dose of anxiety came along, too. If people knew the wrongs that are a part of my past, what would they think?

Do not worry, the Sermon on the Mount says. Don't pursue things to store up in barns to help you feel safer, more secure. Don't run after these things. Your heavenly Father knows what you need. Seek his righteousness, and all these things will be given you as well.

So I looked up *righteousness*. And among others, there was this definition: "To be free from guilt or wrong." I looked up *wrong*:

“Not according to a standard or code, improper, incorrect, unsatisfactory, unsuitable, and inappropriate.” All of which are ways I’ve felt most of my life. I’ve never felt safe in places where there are standards or codes of conduct. School and church have always been places of anxiety for me, although for some reason I stayed in both kinds of places longer than a lot of people I know have. The more chaotic things get, the more comfortable I usually feel. Rules are for people who can’t make up their own.

About two months ago I was taking a shower when something made me turn my head to look over the shower door. I saw God and my dad (who’s been dead for six years) looking at me. I heard

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a voice (not my dad’s) in my head say, “We did good.” I responded, “He didn’t do !@#,\$,” and went back to washing. But after a couple minutes, I looked again. My dad’s eyes were clear, he looked healthy, and he’d lost weight. He looked peaceful. He looked whole. I stared for a few minutes at this mental picture and finally said, “Oh.” In other words, “I see.”

What I saw is that this story that each of us lives is not about us. As much as we try to make it about our individual pains, our hurts, and our shortcomings, the story is about

God’s love. God sees right past our failings, our evils. He looks at us, anticipating that we are capable of reaching our full potential. For the first time in my life I was looking at my dad from the heart, seeing him as God may be seeing him right now. A full, whole person who is now free from the burdens he carried through life, which contributed to making a wreck of it. *For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.* I think this small gate and narrow road are found if we follow the heart. Let your actions do your talking for you. And look at every person, every natural wonder, every moment with anticipation, eager to see if they can become more than what they appear to be at first glance. Eager to see them become more real, more whole.

When I come home and my dog greets me, he seems to be telling me, “Where’ve you been? Take me with you next time! But hey, I’m glad you’re home. What do you want to do now?” Maybe

God sees us in a similar way when we ask, seek, and knock. Maybe God is greeting us when we arrive at home: “Where’ve you been? Take me with you next time! But I’m really glad you’re here. What do you want to do now?”

One of my favorite musical artists is Bruce Cockburn. On a recent album he has a song entitled “Mystery.” The first line is “You can’t tell me there is no mystery. It’s everywhere I turn.” If we can live from the heart, we might be able to see mysteries everywhere we turn. And just maybe get a glimpse of God along the way. *The pure in heart will see God.*

Note

¹ See Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999); and *From Wild Man to Wise Man: Reflections on Male Spirituality* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2005).

About the author

“Will Streeter (1963–2012), spiritual director, teacher, and builder, was an unforgettable student. At midlife, after being inspired by the teachings and friendship of Richard Rohr, Will came to Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (Elkhart, Indiana) to study spiritual direction. While he struggled courageously with a recurrence of ocular melanoma during the time of his study, he persevered in offering both individual and group spiritual direction. As it became clear that his journey would lead to an untimely death, his spiritual sight became clearer and stronger. All who knew him were given an extraordinary gift as we witnessed his amazing human vulnerability and simultaneously the deepening and strengthening of his faith. Will lived and loved well—and was given the gift of purity of heart. We should heed his testimony.”—Marlene Kropf