

December 8, 2022

A Cup of Living Water

IS YOUR PERSONAL CHECK ENGINE LIGHT ON?

The day before I was to drive to a recent church leadership gathering near Atlanta, my car decided it needed an oil change ASAP, emphasizing it with an insistent ding-ding-ding and a persistent dashboard notification. Conceding to this untimely demand, I squeezed an oil change into my already crowded day.

Although annoyed, I thanked God that I could attend to it, and that the oil change came with a bonus ounce of prevention: a tire pressure check. Why, then, did the ding-ding-ding return the very next day, on my way down the mountain, this time accompanied by a low tire pressure notification? Might a tire blow at 70 miles per hour on I-85?

I topped up my tires at the first opportunity, and nursed them along for three days until I was back home. The culprit was a nail in the left rear, pulled and patched for \$10.89, thanks to an honest tire shop technician who assured me that my aging tires still had good life in them. I thanked the tire man, and especially God, for a safe and inexpensive end to the episode, and for dashboard lights that alert us to maintenance needs before a catastrophe occurs.

But while I was at the leadership meeting, I also experienced a prolonged and debilitating dizzy spell like I had never had before. Thankfully, it subsided and did not recur. But I wondered, was that the equivalent of a dashboard light alerting me that my recent jam-packed schedule had depleted me more than I knew? Was preventive personal maintenance overdue?

This is something for all of us to consider from time to time, and especially as holiday demands press in on us. As counterintuitive as it may seem, this time leading up to Christmas, known since the early centuries of the church as Advent, is an apt time to pause and consider our physical, emotional and spiritual condition. Are there any metaphorical dashboard notices flashing, or ding-ding-dings sounding?

The most important indicator -- the human equivalent of an automotive "check engine" light -- is the warning to check our heart. As Bishop Robert Barron explained in a

recent *Word on Fire* gospel reflection, "Your heart or soul is the center of you, the place where you are most authentically and deeply yourself. That is your point of contact with God. There you will find the energy that undergirds and informs all the other areas of your life: physical, psychological, emotional, relational, and spiritual. As such, it is the most important and most elusive dimension of who you are."

Accordingly, God has much to say about the heart in the Bible, referring to it more than 800 times. It all stems from his central command to "love the Lord your God with all your heart," threaded through both the Old Testament and the New (e.g., Deuteronomy 6:5, Matthew 22:37). The word to focus on in that command, as we undergo an Advent heart exam with our divine cardiologist, is "all."

Many things conspire to water down our wholehearted love of God; yet dispensing his love, in humble and grateful response to his utter, unchanging love for us, is what a Christian's life is all about. Ironically, those diluting influences often increase in Advent, when we are supposedly looking back at Jesus' first coming and forward to his second one with rapt -- not wrapped -- anticipation.

We may be enthralled with the traditions and trappings of "the most wonderful time of the year", but can we honestly say it is because we love the Christ Child with all our heart, authenticating it in our love of neighbor?

When we come up short in our heart exam, God invites us to repent, and to rejoice in this grace-filled good news: "The Lord will again delight in you...if you obey the voice of the Lord and keep his commands...and turn to the Lord your God with all your heart" (Deuteronomy 30:9-10). *All of it.*

With love in the Lord,

The Rev. Christine Maddux

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