

With All Your Soul

sermon digest

November 1, 2009

Luke 12:13-23

larry dipboye

How shall we love God? Let me count the ways. According to the Great Commandment in Mark 12:30, “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” An interesting observation: The Great Commandment repeated by Matthew, Mark, and Luke does not cite the *Shema* exactly as in Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and none of the Gospels agree exactly with the others. Each Gospel has a distinct citation of the words, setting the direction for our sermons. Either the Evangelists were sloppy with their quotation of Scripture, or the ways of loving God are not a check-list.

If they are not intended as a list, our sermons on the words cited in the Great Commandment should not be taken as a limits of loving God. The *Shema Israel* calls for loving God with “all”—the totality of your being. A common feature of Hebrew poetry is parallelism in which the same message is repeated in different words. The *Shema* is a poetic statement of the call to radical love for the God of radical love. However, the words are distinct expressions of the human being found throughout the Bible. *Soul* is the only word comprehensive of the totality of being. A person may *have* heart, mind, or strength, but a person *is* a living soul. James Weldon Johnson’s sermon in verse “The Creation” illuminates the intention of Genesis better than most prose commentaries: “This Great God, Like a mammy bending over her baby, Kneeled down in the dust, Toiling over a lump of clay Till he shaped it in his own image; Then into it he blew the breath of life, And man became a living soul.” The stuff of which humans are made, animated by the breath of God, became a “living soul,” *nephesh hayah*.

What is soul? Early Christians were often more influenced by Platonic philosophy than the Bible. From Plato they got the idea that the body and soul are distinct and alien compartments of human life and the idea of an immortal soul that dwells within the prison of the body. A medieval nobleman decided to conduct an experiment. He had a servant sealed in a barrel and allowed to suffocate. When the lid was removed and nothing was seen to leave the barrel, the experiment disproved the existence of the soul. Familiarity with the Bible would have suggested to the man that soul is what we *are*, not what we *have*. The modern battle over abortion has revived medieval discussions of ensoulment. Based on Aristotle’s theory, medieval theologians believed that ensoulment takes place in forty days for males, ninety days for females, or when the moment life is felt within the womb. Such primitive discussions assumed that the soul was something present in the body, but the Jews knew nothing of a bodiless soul or a soul-less body.

In the American culture, *soul* has been claimed as the insider’s word for black Americans. Soul-food, soul-music, soul-dance, or soul-language are obvious references to the African-American culture. Soul brothers and sisters are bound by the common plight of a slave culture. *Soul Theology* (Cooper-Lewter and Mitchell) identifies soul as the sum of all that is typically black, emotive spontaneity, and cultural compulsion to compassion. Leonard Barrett points to the moral and emotional fiber that sustains blacks in their struggles (*SOUL-FORCE*, 1-2) Lerone Bennett (*The Negro Mood*, 89) claims that soul is the acceptance of the contradictions of life. Peter Paris calls it the drive toward effective wholeness in the totality of life. In *Roots of Soul* (Alfred Pasteur and Ivory Toldson) soul is the rhythm that runs through the fabric of black culture.

It may seem that a term that stands at the core of human being should not be claimed as the exclusive possession of a particular ethnic or racial group. However, a people whose very souls were denied by the slave culture that brought them together in this country are justified in reclaiming their soul. One of the early questions raised by Christians in colonial America was whether Native Americans have souls. The question was often asked about the African slaves as a subtle way of denying humanity to primitive people. Long after the Emancipation Proclamation began the end of slavery, people of color were often viewed as less than human.

The racial overtones in *soul* today have an element of retaliation against those who denied soul to people of color. Long before the term applied to culture-bonds in a racially divided world, soul was the unique life-quality given by God at the creation for that other ethnic group, the Jews. The Jewish soul is the very center and source of life. One does not have or possess a soul. To be soul was to be alive, to breathe the very breath of God. The word occasionally applied to animals as well as humans, but

soul always tied the living being to the source of life in God. As Jesus used the word, soul could never have a racially exclusive tone. Indeed, all of God's children are souls.

The Greek word is *psyche* from which we get our word psychology. Carl Jung, the founder of analytical psychology viewed his discipline as a search for the soul. He viewed the reality of the soul as the basis of his work and the treatment of the soul the business of psychotherapy. He called the Bible a "soul-book" and asserted that the soul is the faculty of relationship to God. He observed that statements in the Bible are utterances of the soul; they point to realities that transcend our consciousness. After a struggle with mental illness, Episcopal priest Kathryn Greene-McCreight wrote an article in *Christian Century*, "Mental Illness and the Soul: In God's Hands" (May 2, 2006) in which she argued that mental illness does not take away the soul even when we lose our awareness of God.

What about dementia? Carolyn spoke to this question at her father's funeral affirming her father's loving spirit that continued after his ability to remember had faded. He reassured her family and her self that he continued to be a living soul. At root, the biblical idea of soul comes down to our connection to God. Souls are persons who derive their lives from the God of creation and whose lives are sustained by the unseen mysterious forces in life that transcend our bodily existence.

Have you found your soul? Of 102 instances of the word *psyche* in the New Testament 63 appear in the narratives of the Gospels and Acts. Twenty-eight appear in Luke-Acts. It appears that Luke the beloved physician was something of a psychologist; he was certainly interested in *psyche*. In the Gospels, the characters speak of *psyche*, not the narrator. The word is often spoken by Jesus. For example, Jesus gave a strong hint of the soul connection to God in his parable that we commonly call, "the rich fool." The question focused on the meaning of life. It was a disclaimer that follows a family feud over the inheritance. Jesus said: "one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." The issue he defined is basic to our ethical behavior and our thinking about life. According to the gospel, the meaning of life is not about *having*; it is about *being*. The story is unique to Luke.

Perhaps you have heard the modern proverb: "Life is what happens while we are planning something else." I don't know the origin, but it could have come from our story. Typically, we allow ourselves to drift into obsessions with one thing or another attempting to feather our bed, win the prize, beat out the competition, or build our barns, only to awaken to the shocking reality that life happened while we were getting ready to really live. The urgent word of Christ to his generation and ours is, *life is happening now!* In the depth of your soul, you know that life is not about cars, houses, barns, degrees, or trophies. Life is what happens while we are trying to get there.

Furthermore, life is not about the accumulation of stuff. The soul does not feed on barns, the state of the economy, whether we have more or less than the Joneses, or winning at the game of accumulating material toys. Don't misunderstand. The importance of things is not in question. The issue is the use of things and the assignment of the value of things. "For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing."

Life extends beyond my borders. We live in a world distracted by our internal obsessions. Surrounded by other people, we are consumed by the first person singular. Like the rich fool, our culture has great difficulty in getting beyond *me, I, my, and mine*. The personal pronouns dominate the parable. The man is never aware of the hungry at his door—only the prospect of his own future need. I am amazed that his world did not even include the inner circle of family and friends that we usually consider to be a part of ourselves especially in light of the family feud that prompted the story. Here is a man so totally consumed by his personal welfare that no one else matters.

The tragedy is not in the demand for his soul that comes at death and the question, "whose will these things be?" This man's soul was missing long before the claim of God at the end; he had lost his soul in the sea of things. All souls live in community. We are never complete in ourselves. The plural identity of God, *elohim*, in Genesis 1, "let us," suggests that even the one God of creation is a community, a fellowship.

Molly Marshall's book *What it Means to be Human* includes a story from her student pastor experience. She tells of an elderly deacon who spent his life working in the soil, loving other people,

and serving his church. When he prayed on Sunday morning, he usually would ask God to help us, “remember where we came from,” then, “how much we’ve got to do,” and finally, “how much we need one another to do it.”

Do you remember where you came from, how much you have to do, and how much you need others? The breath of life comes from God. To love God with all of your soul is to recognize that God is the very source of your life. There is no clearer picture of soul than Johnson’s poem reflecting the poetry of creation. God has breathed the breath of life into our bodies. We have no soul, we have no life, until we become aware that our lives come from God and return to God. Apart from the vitality of God in being, life is empty. To live is to love God, and the only way you can love God is with your total self.