

Freedom of the Soul

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Text: 2 Corinthians 3:4-6, 17-18

The soul as a reality is hard to deny. It's also hard to define. We believe there is a soul within human beings. But no surgeon can extract your soul, or sew stitches upon it. It is there, yet it cannot be physically located. It is the only part of you that isn't merely physical. Yet, there seems little debate among atheists or agnostics or poets or adherents of faith that we have a soul. But what is it?

One interesting phenomenon about human beings is how deeply we can go within. There is an inner realm to our existence that seems nearly infinite. Indeed, I have known people so captivated by the inner realm, their psychic, their soul, that they seem to get lost within to the point that they neglect their outer relationships and responsibilities to the world around them. It is possible to go within and get lost.

It is like the layers of an onion. How deep do you go? You can peel away one layer and discover a deeper layer underneath. There surely is an outer journey for human beings: discovery of the world around us. And there surely is an inner journey: discovery of the world within us. Dreams, intuitions, illuminations, revelations, insights, hopes, faith, desires, conscience, the will – are these merely biological functions of the brain – nothing more? Do neurons and cells and synapses explain it all? Is there a soul at the destination of an inner journey that defies scientific explanation? Do we have a soul that we yearn to know or to cultivate? Is the soul part of the human mystery?

I have also known people who completely ignore the inner journey. They seem not to know themselves well nor be very interested. They seem lost in the physical minutia, the day to day mundane of life. Or seem so busy *doing* that they rarely if ever focus upon *being*.

I don't know if you have ever walked a Labyrinth. The labyrinth goes back to medieval times in the church. It is a spiritual walk. One reason I enjoy walking the Labyrinth is because it combines doing (in this case, walking) with being (in this case, quiet meditation). A labyrinth walk brings my consciousness together in a holistic way: doing and being. I'd like to bring a labyrinth walk to First Baptist Church during Lent.

Certainly Jesus modeled the balance between being and doing. So many times, it is reported that Jesus went off into the mountains by himself on retreat or went off to pray with his disciples. And then of course we are well aware of the way he taught, healed,

and had compassion on the crowds, as well as the way he confronted hypocrisy and oppression. He held in balance being and doing. He calls us to do the same.

What is the “being” of human being? What is the “deep within” of our existence? Where do we go on an “inner journey?” I suspect we might agree that faith emanates from the deepest core of our being. Faith is the most profound trust, that we continually shape from the innermost part of our being. In this definition, everyone has faith, everyone shapes faith. Those who are suicidal reflect a profound crisis of faith. Their lives no longer seem trustworthy.

I suspect you know the meaning of a soul mate? It isn’t necessarily a lover, or even romantic. It is someone with whom you connect on such a deep and profound level, revealing your soul, one to the other. It is a soul friend. I hope you have one...at least, one.

What does it mean that we are “made in God’s image?” Does it mean that God looks like us or that we look like God? Of course not. I think it refers to that essential goodness and blessing that is at the heart of each one of us. When you look at our actions on the surface of our lives, it is often hard to recognize goodness and the divine spark. But, planted deep within, in our inner core, rests the image of God in which we were created. God is within us, within each and every one of us, and our souls are the depository of God’s image and God’s love. At our core is eternal love.

We can minimize our souls, even attempt to destroy them. Jesus asked, “What does it profit a person to gain the whole world and lose one’s own soul?” (Mk 8:36)

Oscar Wilde once stated, “How strange a thing this is! The Priest telleth me that the Soul is worth all the gold in the world, and merchants say it is not worth a clipped piece of silver.”

Do you believe in the immortality of the soul? We read in Genesis, “And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living soul.” (Gen. 2:7) Paul wrote in affirming the resurrection of the dead, “What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable.” (1 Cor. 15:42) Paul said, there is a perishable body, our physical body, which will die, and there is an imperishable or spiritual body, the soul, which, made in the image of God, is eternal. If there is any part of us that is immortal, it is this essence, our soul. Carl Jung once wrote, “I simply believe that some part of the human Self or Soul is not subject to the laws of space and time.”

I grew up in a religion of the heart. What mattered was the feeling dimension. What mattered was that Jesus was in my heart. What mattered were strong feelings. Sometime later, around the time that I came to this church, I began valuing a religion of the head. What mattered was a faith that made intellectual sense. A logical, thinking faith mattered. What mattered were right beliefs.

I want to suggest this morning that there may be a third way, and that is the religion of the soul, which neither negates feeling or thinking. A religion of the soul goes deep spiritually, and is free to explore the depths of one's being, the depths of God, the depths of the Spirit, the depths of wisdom.

How does a person "go deep" into the soul? I would suggest that there are good practices of meditation, silence, prayer, contemplation, imagination and soulful conversation.

The human soul grows deeper and more profound as life's experiences come our way. The soul is shaped by our experiences of grief and loss and what we learn from them. The soul is shaped by our experiences of sympathy that pours out of us and into others. The soul is shaped by reverence and awe. Stand in a forest and take in the wonder of what God has created. Stand in awe of what you see and the soul is deepened. The soul is shaped by art and poetry and wisdom and music. The soul is shaped by soulful friends.

Thomas Merton went so far as to say that "every moment and every event of everyone's life on earth plants something in the soul." C.S. Lewis said, "You don't have a soul – you are a soul." Yet, while everyone is a soul – some people don't seem too interested in soul exploration. They don't dig deep – they run along the surface. And a religion that appeals to the surface has great crowd appeal in our society today. But that does not appeal to me. I want to be in a faith community that delves into the mystery of the soul and allows freedom to everyone to find their own way. For I believe that one meets God in the soul as surely as I think one can meet God in a forest or at the seashore or in the star-spangled sky. Go deep! And meet God!

As I was thinking about this sermon, I thought of that expression so popular with many Baptists, the idea of soul-winning. I know what is meant by it: that without Christ, the soul is lost and those who are involved in the saving of souls win those souls for Christ. If you want to hear me say something heretical this morning, I shall oblige, for I don't like the concept of soul-winning. The last thing I would want to do is to triumph over your soul, or to take possession of your soul, to win your soul, as in winning the lottery. What shall I do with it when I have won it? There are religious leaders who seem to enjoy confiscating or monopolizing the souls of others – as if they could. I would be delighted to introduce you to the love of Christ, and deeply moved for you to allow that love to touch your very soul. But "soul-winning" sounds triumphal, like a military victory, like a numbers game. How many souls have you won? Hopefully, none. Souls are not meant for winning. They are meant to be deeply respected, even a tormented soul, especially a tormented soul. Never allow me or anyone else to take over your soul. I would be honored if you would reveal some part of your soul with me – and may I never take advantage, may I treat you with respect, yea, even with reverence if indeed the soul is where God's love is revealed.

Soul liberty seems the opposite to me of soul-winning. Soul liberty is my encouraging, or helping to create, the space for you to shape your own soul, to form your

own faith, without my attempt to control or interfere or manipulate. Isn't that a beautiful thing? That at First Baptist Church we create a climate where people are free to shape their own soul, their own spiritual responses, their own relationship to Christ, their own experience of God's love, their own encounter with the wisdom of the Bible? What's happening these days at First Baptist Church? Wouldn't it be wonderful to say: soul liberty flourishes?

Soul liberty is a freedom dear to Baptists. It grants each person the right to shape one's own faith, to reach within the soul to form one's own responses. We don't corral people; we don't crusade people; we grant people the spiritual space to approach God and to follow the dictates of their own soul.

We don't ask for allegiance to a creed; we don't urge conformity. We invite individuals to approach God in Christ and then to create a style of discipleship that makes sense to themselves. One little girl was not about to allow her teacher to impose upon her freedom to think. The little girl was telling her teacher the story about Jonah being swallowed by the whale. The teacher said, "Lydia, that's physically impossible because a whale's mouth is actually very small."

Lydia argued her point, but the teacher remained firm, "A whale cannot swallow a human being."

Lydia said, "When I get to heaven, I will ask Jonah."

The teacher said, "What if Jonah went to hell?"

Lydia responded, "Then you ask him."

Lydia seemed to understand that soul liberty is a precious right, worth defending. There aren't many places in this world that aren't trying to push you in a certain direction. There aren't many places that respect the value of questions, or the value of a spiritual quest, without censorship. Of course, members of our church have found deep faith in God as revealed through Jesus Christ. This is the core of our faith. But no one needs us to defend the borders, or to treat those at the margins of our faith with severity. We need only be clear as to the center and allow God's Holy Spirit to work around the edges. What we offer in soul liberty is an environment where faith can be freely shaped and where tools and resources are offered that assist people in their faith development. So many times down through the years I have served churches that practice soul liberty and we have offered this to people, and they have come alongside us for a time, enjoying the freedom found in our midst. And then, in freedom, they move on – and do so with our blessing that their spiritual search will lead to their own well-being.

Soul liberty is not individualistic. We believe as Baptists that it is a social endeavor, and should occur in a communal context. It is the only way we can remain on a faithful path. My mother enjoys telling the story of visiting her brother's church in Casper, Wyoming. And in a Sunday School class, an old rancher was speaking. He said, "I just can't understand how folks in your part of the country have racial prejudice against black people. It's just wrong." But within a few minutes, in a different context, the same man said, "Now as for the Indians, they are all a bunch of drunken good-for-nothings." Casper, of course, has very few African Americans and many Native

Americans. And that narrowness of vision, to not catch our own bias, to not see our narrow assumptions, is the reason soul liberty must be practiced communally. Baptist scholar of years ago, William Newton Clarke said, "Faith is the daring of the soul to go farther than it can see." We do that best with soulful friends.

In the 1800's, Baptist leader Francis Wayland stated, "We have always proclaimed that every child of God has the right, in his own person, of drawing near to God through the intercession of the one and only Mediator and High Priest...", Jesus the Christ. Wayland warned against the "universal tendency of teachers of Religion to...assert dominion over the conscience, and to use the power which they have usurped for their own advantage." (Baptist Roots, Judson Press, p. 221) In defending soul liberty, Wayland said that Baptists "have always believed in the absolute right of private Judgment in all matters of Religion..." (222) Voices like Wayland's should reverberate through the halls of this church.

Despite the stereotypes about us, we must tell the world about this wonderful gift of soul liberty. We must tell them, "You do not know the Baptists: for we are a freedom-loving people!" Amen.