

## **got soul?**

Matthew 22:15-22

October 12, 2014

How is it with your soul?

Do you ever ask yourself that question? Do you give any thought, any attention to the condition of your soul, the health of your soul? Do you ever ask anybody else that question? Did you ask anybody this morning when you came into the church? Did anybody ask you: "How it is with your soul?" Do we do that? If not, why not? Because, isn't that why we come here, to take care of our souls?

How is it with your soul?

That was the question that spawned the Methodist Church. In 1729, Charles Wesley and his older brother John, along with John Whitefield and a few other Oxford University students, met daily to ask each other that question: "How is it with your soul?" But what did they mean by that? What did they mean by "soul?" What do we mean by "soul?" What is the "soul?"

Let me tell you what it is not! Almost from the beginning, the Christian understanding of "soul" has been sadly distorted by an infiltration of platonic metaphysics. What do I mean by that? I mean that we have come to regard ourselves, under the influence of Plato and his disciples, as composed of two distinct and separable parts: body and spirit, body and soul, perishable body and imperishable soul, mortal body and immortal soul.

Immortal soul? Perhaps this is why we find this view of human "being" so appealing! We don't want to think of ourselves as mere stuff, mere matter, mortal creatures.

But this dualistic view of human "being" has devastating spiritual consequences. If the real "me" is eternal spirit and my body is merely an appendage, a temporary home, then my spiritual journey is an entirely inner journey, about thoughts and feelings and beliefs, about pulling away from worldly distractions to give unencumbered attention to eternal, "spiritual," "heavenly," other-worldly realities. I go about my life as it is, but my life as it is is rather inconsequential. It is in the quiet places, the places of retreat, the places of withdrawing from the world -- like church! -- that I attend to the real "me," that I prepare for my real life that will be when my soul is at last released from its earthly bondage. It's all about getting my soul ready for heaven! That's where I will see God. That's where I will be with God.

Does it make any difference, then, what I do or how I am in my daily living, in my interaction with the rest of the world? Not really, because this world doesn't matter. Sure, I do good works, but I am primarily motivated by a desire to earn "spiritual points" with God, to make myself worthy of heaven. Thinking like this, I become so heavenly-minded that I am no earthly good!

Such dualism is contrary to the biblical view of human "being" both in Old Testament and New, but it is also contrary to common sense, to the plain and obvious sense of who we are and how we are.

Who are we? WYSIWYG! What you see is what you get! We are what we seem to be: embodied creatures who think and feel and act.

And how are we? In relationship. Always in and by relationship. Inextricably connected to the world in which we live and move and have our being. Inextricably connected to each other. Shaped and defined and given identity by our connections.

Can you even imagine a disembodied, disconnected existence of your self? Who would you be? How would you be? You wouldn't be your self! You couldn't be your self! This is not what we mean by "soul."

Then what do we mean? Well, how do we use the word?

We talk about the "twenty-nine brave souls aboard the Edmund Fitzgerald," the freighter that sank in a storm on Lake Superior in 1975. And by "twenty-nine souls" we mean? We mean twenty-nine people. Soul means person.

We say, "she has soul." And we mean? We mean she has depth, gravity, substance, that her life is not shallow and superficial, but that she has something going on.

We say, "he is the soul of the team." And we mean? We mean he gives the team identity and direction. He defines its trajectory, its way of being team.

So "soul" is ...? You. Your self. You in motion. You in action. Your way of being. The trajectory of your self. You being you.

The New Testament word translated "soul" is psyche and it means life, self, the whole of who you are, the whole of how you are.

This is what they meant -- John and Charles and the others -- when they asked each other: "How is it with your soul?" They meant: "How are you being? How are you doing?" They met for three hours, every evening, doing Bible study together, praying together, examining the substance and trajectory of their lives together. But they also took communion, in church, weekly, making it a point to nurture this emblem of connection to Christ and to other Christians. And they visited men in prison, taking them food and medicine and the gospel. And they spent time with children living in poverty, providing clothing and teaching them to read.

The journey of the soul is both an inner journey and an outer journey and the two are not distinct and not separable. The journey of the soul is a journey of the whole self, as it is, here and now, in relationship to the world, as it is, here and now. This is where I will see God, and this is where I will be with God!

They met with each other, holding each other accountable, striving to live as God called them to live, striving for holiness. For them, the spiritual life was about relationship and responsibility, about reclaiming their role in response to and in cooperation with the grace of God at work in them.

They believed, John Wesley believed, in the possibility of Christian perfection, of entire sanctification, of becoming so filled with God's holy Spirit -- by practice and by discipline and by grace -- as to become free of bondage to sin, here and now, to be completely governed by love, to be completely filled with Christ, to be remade in Christ's image.

It was from these beginnings, from that small group of men that met daily and challenged each other to strive for nothing less than entire holiness, that the Methodist Church was born. And from these roots and the influence of this way of thinking other churches and other Christian movements sprung including the Salvation Army, the holiness churches, Wesleyan churches, the Church of the Nazarene, and Pentecostalism.

Methodism stands alongside Lutheranism and Calvinism as three primary strands of the Protestant reformation, each with its own particular focus and emphasis: Calvinism on unconditional grace, Lutheranism on saving grace, and Methodism on sanctifying grace. And each, as I have been suggesting, has its own particular weaknesses and strengths, which is why we need each other, which is why we must not be Methodists or Lutherans or Baptists or Roman Catholics or Pentecostals, but Christians, followers of Jesus together, one church.

In my view, the weakness of the idea of Christian perfection or entire sanctification, known in other circles as the second blessing or baptism in the Holy Spirit or the higher life or perfect love is that it creates divisions within the body of Christ, different classes of Christians, higher and lower, and that it can put much of the onus for our salvation back on us, instead of relying utterly and humbly on God who has acted unilaterally to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves, to set us free from the law of sin and death through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ!

But it is a strength, too, a wonderful and needed strength for the whole church to reclaim the responsibility that is ours, to act here and now in justice and in love, to seek deeper communion with God and deeper commitment to our neighbors, and to work together to build God's kingdom here and now, to strive for holiness, all of us, with each other's help and with the help of God's grace.

How is it with your soul?

It's a good question to ask. Are you striving for holiness, for nothing less than entire holiness, to be as Christ is? Inside and outside? In being and in doing? And, if not, why not? Were you made for anything less? Were you made for anything less?

I have now come to the end of a sermon without once referring to the Scripture text! So let me leave you with this. Jesus said, "Pay to the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor and pay to God what belongs to God." And what do you suppose belongs to God?