“All your soul”

Psalm 103:1-5, Isaiah 55:1-3, Luke 12:13-23, John 13:33-38

February 7, 2016, David M. Griebner, Riverside UMC

This winter we are studying what is often called the Great Commandment. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength,” and “Love your neighbor as yourself.” This week and next we are working on the second part of Jesus’ teaching, love the Lord with all our **soul**. To understand what Jesus is telling us here we need to understand, or appreciate, what the word “soul” meant to Him. My guess is that many of us tend to think about the soul as the part of us, or the thing in us, that goes to heaven (or hell) when we die.

But here’s the problem. This is actually a Greek concept, not Jewish. The idea that the soul is something inside us that is eternal comes from Greek philosophy. But Jesus wasn’t Greek, was He? He was Jewish, He was a Hebrew and His source for truth wasn’t Greek philosophy, but the scriptures of the Old Testament. Now, listen carefully. I’m not saying that we don’t have a soul in another sense, something that does exist after death, beyond this life and this body. I’m simply saying that, from what we know about the soul in Jewish or Hebrew thought, this is not the main idea that Jesus would have had on His mind, nor would it have been the main thought of His audience.

So how would Jesus have described the soul? What did He have in mind when He told us to love God with all our soul? In the Old Testament the word translated “soul” is the Hebrew word *nephesh*. *Nephesh* literally means “breath.” We can see this in Genesis 2:7. “Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became *a living being*.” A more literal translation would be “and the man became a *nephesh*,” or even more literally, “*a thing that breathes.”*

This connection to breath, or breathing, is in fact a clue to what the word “soul” means and what Jesus is trying to tell us. To describe a human being as “something that breathes” points to one of the basic needs we all have: Air. We need oxygen. Without it we die. So the word *nephesh* captures not only the fact that we are a living being, but also as a living being we need some very specific things or we will die. Air is one of them. Water is another. So in Psalm 42 the Psalmist can link the yearning of his soul with the need for water. “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.” Our physical need for water captures the spiritual need we have for a relationship with God.

Here’s how one person sums it up. “In the Bible the “soul” designates the whole person as characterized by desires, wishes, even cravings.” So, when Jesus says “Love the Lord your God with all your soul,” He’s saying something like this: Love the Lord your God with all your desires, wishes, and cravings. Or, as another person put it, “with every moment.” (Lois Tverberg, *Walking in the Dust of Rabbi Jesus*, p. 48)

For the rest of this message I want to look at some scriptures that talk about the soul. After we look at each passage I’m going to give us a moment to reflect on our soul, on our desires, wishes, and cravings. Think of this as an invitation to have a conversation with your soul.

We start with Psalm 103. “Bless the Lord, O my soul, *and all that is within me*, bless his holy name! Bless the Lord, O my soul, *and forget not all his benefits*.”The Psalm starts with the exact understanding we’ve been talking about. To love God with all our soul is to love God with *all that is within us.* Our love for God is not part of who we are or a part of what we do, but the center of all our desires, wishes and cravings. And then the psalmist gives us an example of what he’s thinking of. “Bless the Lord, O my soul, *and forget not all his benefits*.” What is this? It’s gratitude. Gratitude is one of the most basic, if not the most basic or fundamental, emotion or attitude we need to become a believer. Honestly, without gratitude it’s hard for me to imagine how someone could enter in a true relationship with God. What is he grateful for? Forgiveness. Healing. Redemption. Our relationship with God begins when we admit to Him that we need the forgiveness, healing, and redemption that only He can give. This is the desire that must captivate our soul. So let’s pause for a moment. *How would you rate the current state of your gratitude for everything God has done for you?*

Next look at the passage from Isaiah. “Come, everyone who thirsty, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?” Isaiah warns us that we have what I might call a self-destructive tendency to turn down the amazing free gift that God offers us and instead choose something else that costs far more and delivers infinitely far less. We know this doesn’t make any sense at all, and yet we all do it. We spend our time, energy and money on things that we know from past experience do not speak to our true desires. On the other hand we push to the side or the back burner the kind of spiritual things that we know have quenched our thirst, like prayer, worship, and scripture. So let’s pause again for a moment. *Can you sense where this might be true for you? Where do you suspect you may be actively choosing something that does not satisfy, and where do you sense God wants to give you something that does?*

The next passage from Luke gives us an extreme example of the failure to accept God’s offer. There was a man, says Jesus, who made it big. In fact he made it so big he didn’t know what to do with it all. So he decided he would just pile it all up and live off it for the rest of his life ­– which turned out to be one day. Sometimes we say that the people of Israel were “Blessed to be a blessing.” Well, this guy was blessed, but he only shared the blessing with himself. He turned his soul completely inward; he focused all his desires, wishes and cravings on himself and his own comfort. And he got to enjoy it for one day. *Where have you been blessed, and where might God be inviting you to be a blessing?*

One more. These three passages all show us what our soul desperately craves and, at the same time, they reveal how we can miss the boat. Our final passage adds something essential that we haven’t talked about yet. It is the last night of Jesus’ life. He has just told the disciples that He is going away, and that they cannot follow Him. Peter demands to know why he can’t come and declares that he is prepared to lay down his life for Jesus. The word that is translated *life* is a Greek word that is the equivalent of the Hebrew word *nephesh*, and is also often translated *soul*. In response Jesus informs Peter that, not only can he not deliver what he just promised, but before the night is done he will in fact do the opposite and deny Jesus three times. However, that will not be the end of it for Peter. After the resurrection, and after he has been filled with the Holy Spirit, Peter will keep his promise. In front of the very people who crucified Jesus he will put His life on the line again and again and again for His Lord.

Here’s the final lesson: We cannot love God with all our soul by our own strength. We cannot pursue Him with all our desires, wishes and cravings on our own. We will always come up short. We will forget to be grateful. We will often choose what costs us more and delivers infinitely less. And we will hoard our blessings. Like Peter we need the empty tomb and the Holy Spirit. Let’s be specific this time. *Take a moment and ask for His strength and the power of His Holy Spirit.*

Now, let’s come to the table. On this table, in the bread and cup, Jesus offers us what our soul longs for. Here is the forgiveness, healing, and redemption the Psalmist reminded his soul to remember. Here is the free gift Isaiah asked us to reach out and take. Unlike the man with the barns, here is our Lord not holding anything back, giving all He has, His very life, His soul, for us. This is what our thirsty soul craves most. Come, the cost for this feast has been paid in full.