

2022 01 16 Love the Lord your God with all your Soul  
Toronto United Mennonite Church

Scriptures:

Luke 10:25-28 - the greatest commandment

Matthew 6:19-21 - for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also

Mark 8:34-38 - what will it profit a man if he gain the world but lose his soul

*The sermon begins with an exercise where congregants are invited to stand, move through a short series of awareness exercises, and are finally asked to point to their souls.*

If we did this experiment with people around the world, we would see some patterns. Because different cultures locate the soul differently. Anthropologists have recorded some fascinating ideas, and studying various theories of the soul is a complicated mix of anatomy, philosophical inquiry, metaphysics, and history.

Christian Europe inherited the Arab and Greek philosophical tradition which had an ongoing argument about whether the soul was located in the brain or in the heart. Plato believed that the soul had three components, in the head, heart and gut, each with a particular focus. Others taught that willpower was in the brain, and instinct was in the heart. Over the centuries in Western Europe the soul became detached from the body, and came to represent the idea of the person. In some cultures the soul floats two feet above the head, in others it is in the gut or the genitals, or in the blood.

All these inquiries were explorations of what it means to be conscious, to think and feel and remember. The soul is the inner life, the deep self, the part of you which brings together everyone you are in all the different spaces you are in, in your relationships and throughout your life. So it's hard to point to!

If you're into this I can send you a fascinating article about Leonardo DaVinci's search for the location of the soul! ([Link for the article](#) - contact me if you would like to read a copy)

Generally when people today think about the soul they mean the part of you which survives the death of the body and lives on. Some Christian churches have put a lot of time and energy into making people concerned about the state of their soul and where it will be going after death, either union with God, or separation from God. The teaching goes that unless you build a relationship with Jesus, your soul will be lost upon death, because God will not accept it. It is a powerful teaching, and an unhealthy one.

Sometimes, people neglect their lives on earth, their responsibilities to their neighbours and to creation. They are taught that the immortal soul is the only thing that matters, and that bodies and flesh and matter and life are distractions, or illusions, or inherently evil. This is not very healthy. And it is not a new phenomenon. For this service I chose scriptures that are sometimes quoted to imply that we should reject the body and focus on the soul. I wonder how you heard them when they were read?

You might be interested to learn that the [Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective](#) does not mention the soul. Of course, that does not mean that Mennonite Christians don't believe in the soul. The confession assures us that in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the powers of sin and death are broken, we are set free, and the way is opened to new life.

And I want to be very clear about that. New life, sometimes called eternal life, is not a disembodied ghostly existence that starts after death. It begins in every moment that we align our lives with Jesus, and it has no end. Your soul, your whole self, your body and your being are all sites of the regeneration life. God is not coming to harvest your soul and throw away the rest of creation. God is uncompromisingly here for the whole thing.

We have so many different ideas about the soul. We can't even agree on where it is! But I want you to know not to panic about saving your soul. In fact, you need to focus on love.

In the scripture we are studying, Jesus says that the soul is for loving. He identifies the most important commandments, quoting from the ancient guidance that God gave to the Jewish people. You are to love God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind, and to love your neighbour as you love yourself. So Jesus is fully in line with the Jewish teaching that love of God and love of other people is the first duty of life. You have to love with everything you are, everything you have, including your soul.

In a minute I am going to ask you what are some of the things that might stop or prevent a soul from loving.

There is an interesting archaic phrase about one of the duties of a priest - a priest is responsible for 'the cure of souls'. You might think I would be concerned with that, but happily for us all, I am not a priest. As Anabaptist Christians we collectively share the priestly responsibilities, which means we are all responsible for the cure of souls, and therefore we all have to do some thinking about how to cure a soul, and what a soul might need to be cured from.

So I have two questions. What might block a soul from loving? And, What are some of the things that make a soul sick? Unable to function, or working harmfully.

[Pause for discussion]

If your soul is ill, or weary, or oppressed, what are some of the other words we use for that?

The sickness of a soul cannot be treated separately from sickness of bodies and minds, from disordered social and economic positions. Poverty and riches are bad for the bodies and souls of the rich and the poor. They are disordered states.

I have already said that there is some harmful teaching about the soul, especially when it causes people to obsess about their souls rather than anything else. Lots of teaching about the soul starts from the idea that it is the opposite of the body.

- The soul is immortal while the body will die
- The soul is immaterial and intangible, while the body can be touched and seen,
- God sees the soul, while humans see the body.

There is a risk in focusing too much on that difference. We are souls and bodies, both, and we should be careful not to disregard the body, its needs, and its wisdom. Remember the idea that the soul is present in the head, the heart, and the gut? Or the Jewish idea that the life, the soul is in the blood?

In future weeks other preachers will talk about our bodies. And we need to look for ways to engage our bodies, especially when we are sitting in front of screens. Souls need bodies, too. Wisdom teaches that there is not as much difference between body and soul as it first seems.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus says some hard words to his disciples about losing your life to save your soul. But it is the same Greek word that is used to mean both life and soul. Listen to his words with that in mind:

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?”

In our English translation these words seem to imply trading in your mortal life to save your immortal soul. But it is the same word. Jesus makes no distinction between your life as a human body and your life as an immortal soul. It's all on the line when it comes to following the way of Jesus. And the mystery is that however much you try to prioritize your own life, it can never be enough.

Even if you own everything, learn everything, take power over the whole world, it will not change the basic fact that your life, your soul, is still finite and precious, and not yours to keep. "What can anyone give in exchange for their soul?"

In another place, Jesus tells us not to gather treasures on earth, where things can be lost, damaged, or stolen, but to store up treasures in heaven. For where your treasure is, your heart will be there as well.

And again, people read this as rejection of the body and the material world. And it is mockery of people who try to buy and build and brag their way to immortality. Don't trust in those things to form your soul. Instead, ascribe worth to what gives life. Worship is called worship because it is about the worth we perceive. Worship is reorientation to true worth. It is about the things that you find worthwhile, that you give yourself toward, that is where you will find your heart, that is where your soul finds its meaning.

You have something that cannot be bought or sold. It cannot be stolen or worn away. It is your soul. It is your deep, true self. The world can give you money and kingdoms and pleasure and power, but it cannot give you this. The world can take your health, your happiness, your property and your peace, but it cannot take this.

That's the teaching of the soul. The soul is what you feel, and what you feel with, in times of crisis, of critical decision, of deep meaning. The soul is not in one place of your body, it is in whichever place your life is coming true. In any moment your soul is to be found in the actions and encounters where you are living abundantly, eternally, where the truth of who you are is connected with God's desire for healing and restoration of the cosmos.

When your deep self rises to address a challenge or need, in that time and place the soul is there. So the soul is in your hands as you hold your newborn child, or the hand of a dying friend. The soul is in your heart when it burns with its first infatuation. Your soul is in your gut as you realize that you are in an unhealthy situation. Far too often my soul is in my head, thinking, planning.

You must love the Lord your God with all your soul. Not because you are afraid of losing it, but because you were made by love, and your soul lives in love.

No wonder it is so hard to point to the soul. Your soul points toward Love.

Thanks be to God.