

Sermon

The Psalmist said their soul pants for God. The Killers claimed to have soul, but denied being soldiers. Jewel wondered who will save your soul. The Blues Brothers are sure they are soul men. Charlie Daniels thinks the devil has a fiddle of gold which you can win if you are willing to bet your soul.

I think we keep using this word soul - but it doesn't mean what you think it means.

In all seriousness - soul is a word we use a lot - but can you define it? The reality is, there are a lot of conceptions of the soul - some people think it is the non-material part of us that is trapped in our material bodies waiting to be released to live on forever after our deaths. Some may argue that it is the divine spark of God that is present in each of us. But when we look at the word being used in our text from Deuteronomy - and try to gain an understanding that is more similar to that of the ancient Hebrews - a very different definition of soul begins to emerge.

The word that we translate as soul, is Nephesh - as I taught to the kids. And Nephesh is a really rich word. It can refer to our full living being - as in Genesis when God blows life into the human and it becomes a living being - it becomes a living nephesh. The concept of Nephesh being something separate and disconnected from a physical body is not a Hebrew concept at all - it's Greek. And so our bodies and our souls are necessarily entwined - in the same ways that the physical neural processes that trigger emotion or consciousness or other non material pieces of us are connected. Nephesh is also wrapped up in our drive and our desire. Our passion - and none of those things are disconnected from our physical bodies or actions. Our souls are our full living being. God breathed the breath of life into you and you became a living Nephesh. You are a living soul...

Which brings us to the broader question of this worship series...how does one love God with that? With their whole nephesh? With our souls?

Psalm 119 is our guide for wondering about these questions this morning. It is the longest Psalm in the Bible and you've already heard me say that it is an acrostic. Which means that each 8 line section begins with a letter from the 22 letter Hebrew alphabet. Acrostic poetry is a great teaching tool because they root the reader into a single theme. In this case - the theme is the law - I'll come back to that later. But because of the nature of each section revolving around the same theme - but beginning with different letters - you essentially have 176 ways of saying the same thing. Which is roughly about the number of times we have to repeat things to learn them, right?

It's actually intentionally repetitive - the hope is that the psalm is read aloud - again and again - inviting meditation and contemplation. James Mays praises this form's "sharp simplicity and constant variation." "[those] variations enchant the imagination," he says. If we let them.

The rest of this sermon is an invitation to reflect as we move through these sections of poetry from Psalm 119 - on your whole being - your life and emotions and desires all mixed

in with your body and talents and actions - it's a chance to think seriously on this thing we sometimes take for granted or don't stop and think long and hard about because we assume we already know what it is. This is a space to wonder about your soul - your nephesh.

I noted a moment ago that Psalm 119 is focused around the theme of the law. Which is typically a stumbling block for modern readers such as ourselves. We think of the law as "the rules" or all the things we AREN'T supposed to do. But that's not a fair rendering of what is meant when Ancient Hebrews are thinking about the law or the Torah. For them - and I hope for us - the law is a gift, not a burden or a punishment. It might be better for us to think of law as "this way of life" - this way of following Jesus that is in line with his teaching and living. The Psalmist loves this way of life because of the ways it nourishes their nephesh - and they invite us to do the same.

*My soul is consumed with longing
for your ordinances at all times.
Your testimonies also are my delight
And my counselors.*

Clearly the Psalmist is sustained by this way of life they have chosen - this living in the midst of God's laws. It drives and guides them. Their nephesh is in constant conversation with this way of life - it is consumed by it. Their whole being is more alive - and in fact delighted because of it.

What about you, my dear friends, what passions make your whole being come alive? The Lily Foundation asks the question this way - What makes your heart sing?

*My soul clings to the dust;
revive me according to your word.
My soul melts from heaviness;
strengthen me according to your word.*

I suspect that many of us are familiar with the experience of our souls melting under the heaviness of the world - of grief or pain, of chronic illness or violence, of injustice or despair. When has sorrow melted your drive - your commitment to this way of life that loves God and others?

The Psalmist finds strength in God's word - in reading and meditating on it. It is a reminder of who we are. And of whose we are. The Psalmist - and any one of us - can simply walk out into creation and remember - we can listen to the stories of faith and remember. That remembering - both of who we are - and who we have chosen to be by committing to a particular way of life - that remembering brings the Psalmist's soul back to life.

Where in your nephesh do you need to be reminded? Reminded of who you are?
Reminded of your choices and commitments to faithfulness?

*My soul keeps your testimonies;
I love them exceedingly.*

The nephesh holds on to the stories - the testimonies that keep us rooted in our faith - rooted in God's love. Stories of awe, joy, peace, hope, love. Stories of strength when all looked impossible, of liberation and faithfulness. You are filled with the stories of God at work. And telling them brings life to your soul and to those souls around you.

What are the stories that your nephesh loves? The ones that show you who you want to be? That guide and inspire you? That fill you up and make you want to share?

*I cling to Your testimonies;
O Lord, do not put me to shame!
I will run the course of Your commandments,
For You shall enlarge my heart.*

Conclusion

So what, my friends is a soul? Or perhaps the question is more accurately put - how are YOU a soul?

How are you unique and alive with passions, desires, capabilities? And how are you out in the world with those things connected? How are you - as a living nephesh - paying attention, noticing, sharing stories of faithfulness? How are you a soul, loving God?

Amen