

“What the Soul Needs”

Date: Sept. 27, 2015

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Luke 19:1-10; Matthew 13:44-46

Theme: Soul care

Occasion: Soul Keeping series

We’re beginning week three of a series called *Soul Keeping*, based on the book by John Ortberg. John Ortberg and I have similar tastes in movies. He remembers a movie made in 1991 starring Bill Murray and Richard Deyfuss called “What About Bob.” I loved it.

Bill Murray plays the title character – a very neurotic, obsessive compulsive and phobic personality. This guy has more issues than Monk does. He is extremely dependent on his therapist and even follows him when he goes on vacation. Ortberg quotes, from memory:

“I have problems breathing. Problems swallowing. Numb lips. Fingernail sensitivity. Pelvic discomfort. What if my heart stops beating? What if I’m looking for a bathroom and I can’t find one and my bladder explodes?” Poor Richard Dreyfuss is the exhausted, impatient therapist who is stuck caring for Bob. Funny movie!

Your soul is Bob. You are Richard Dreyfuss. It is the nature of the soul to need, and you are its keeper. Your soul is quite vulnerable because it is so needy. If you meet those needs with the wrong things the game is over, or at least the game is not going to go well.

Thomas Aquinas wrote that this neediness of the soul is a pointer to God. We are limited in virtually every aspect of our lives. We have limited strength, limited intelligence, limited energy, limited mortality. There is only one area where human beings are *unlimited*.

We have unlimited desire. We always want more: more time, more beauty, more money, more cute cat and dog videos on

YouTube. This is the soul crying out. We never have enough. The truth is, the souls' infinite capacity to want more is the mirror image of God's infinite capacity to give. What if the real reason we feel like we never have enough is that God isn't finished giving? The unlimited neediness of the soul is matched by the unlimited grace of God.

Our problem as human beings is not our neediness; it's our fallen-ness. Our need was meant to point us to God. Instead we have latched on to other things to satisfy our need besides God. The moment I allow something else to be put on a pedestal higher than God, that something becomes an idol. All sin involves idolatry.

If your soul is devoted to something that becomes more important to you than God, *that* is your idol. Now, the soul cannot give up its idol by sheer willpower. It won't work. It never works. In many ways, what the Bible calls idolatry we might call addiction.

You can be an addict and never drink any alcohol or smoke any dope or shoot any drug into your arm. Nice things like food, shopping, recreation, hobbies and pleasure can move imperceptibly from casual enjoyment to addiction. Idols turn us away from our freedom.

This is where grace comes in. I cannot replace an idol simply by turning away from it. I must turn toward something else. Zacchaeus had an overwhelming passion for money. As a tax collector he gave up relationships, integrity and honor for his idol.

Then, one day he met Jesus. "Today I'm repaying everyone I've cheated four times over, and I'm giving half the rest of it to the poor," Zacchaeus said. What led him to do that? He had a new, overwhelming positive passion.

The soul must orbit around something other than itself. The soul needs something besides itself to worship. It is the nature of the soul to need. What the soul truly needs is God. We may try to fill that need with other things, but the soul will never be satisfied without God.

So, we can simply accept the fact that our soul is needy. We are needy people, and that doesn't mean we're weak, it means we're human. God created us to be needy – to need Him. Our soul begins to grow in God when we acknowledge our basic neediness.

You and nobody else is responsible for the care of your soul. Your parents can't do it for you. Your spouse can't do it for you. Your pastor can't do it for you. Your doctor can't do it; your therapist can't do it for you. You are your soul's keeper.

In one of those conversations that John Ortberg had with his spiritual mentor, Dallas Willard, Dallas told him, "You must arrange your days so that you are experiencing total contentment, joy and confidence in your everyday life with God."

John objected. He told his close friend, my work isn't going well, my marriage isn't that great. I'm inadequate as a pastor, husband and father. I carry the weight of a church on my back and I feel the pain if it doesn't go well. His mentor replied,

"I didn't say you should experience total contentment, joy and confidence in the remarkable adequacy of your competence, or the amazingly successful circumstances of your life. It's the total contentment, joy and confidence of your everyday experience of God. This alone is what makes a soul healthy."

You and I are responsible for the well-being of our souls. Now,

We will be spending the next several weeks talking about how to care for our souls, what it needs, and what we can do to tend to it.

Ortberg reminds us that we reap what we sow. He calls it the law of consequences. A soul that is not cared for properly will surely die.

In our day, we talk a lot about self-talk. “Watch what you say to yourself, it may become a self-fulfilling prophecy,” you may have heard. Books have been written on the importance of self-talk. Everybody talks to themselves. We do it all day long. Do you ever listen to the thoughts you say to yourself?

In the Bible, though, people talk to their souls. “Bless the Lord, o my soul, and all that is within me, bless God’s holy name.” The difference between talking to yourself and talking to your soul is that the soul exists in the presence of God.

People in the Bible do that - talk to their souls - and the conversation turns to prayer. It naturally turns to prayer, because in the soul God is always present.

Normally when people get angry about something, we mutter under our breath. “Well, that was stupid, you big dummy.” We beat up on ourselves, or worse we beat on others. We might find temporary relief for our frustration, but the soul still cries for attention.

So, what if we tried this? The next time we blow something, or when you’re anxious or dis-satisfied about something, instead of the usual mindless self-talk, what if we speak to our souls?

“What are you afraid, my soul?” “Why are you angry, o my soul?” At first it may seem a little silly. But remember, you were already talking to yourself, how is this that different? And remember this: you and you alone are the keeper of your soul. Only you.

I was coming home from a workshop that I attended, this past Wednesday, traveling on Interstate 79, headed north on a beautiful, sunny afternoon. I was enjoying the sunshine and the trees and the leaves that are just starting to turn color. It was a great day.

Then I looked down to pick up my cell phone. I wanted to call home and ask Barb about our dinner plans. And my phone was missing. I looked under my briefcase; in the console, on the floor. I opened the glove compartment; not there.

I'm starting to panic. Where did I leave it? Oh, I stopped in Grove City to get something to drink. Did I leave it on the counter when I got my wallet out? "Oh no! You dummy! You lost your wallet this summer already and now you've lost your phone!" Self-talk.

But I read this chapter in Ortberg's book and I stopped myself. "Why are you anxious, o my soul?" and I turned to prayer. "God, watch over my phone. May the person who finds it keep it safe and not use it for any bad purposes. Keep my phone safe," I prayed.

I calmed down. I couldn't do anything else then and there. I simply had to trust that it would be all right. When I got to the church I planned to call my cell phone and talk to the person who found it. But first, let me look in the trash bag attached to the gear shift. Guess what I found? My cell phone had slid off the seat into the trash bag.

I found that if I prayed, instead of talking to myself, my soul felt cared for. I put the problem in God's hands and didn't worry any more. In turning to God, my soul was reassured. I didn't lose my phone, I lost my worries. Your soul is extremely needy. You, and only you, are its keeper. May you find joy and contentment every day in your life with God. Amen? Amen.