

First Presbyterian Church
Cheyenne, Wyoming
October 11, 2009
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: Looking into Our Souls

Psalms 22: 1-15, 19-21, Hebrews 4: 12-16, Mark 10: 17-31

We love to look into things, don't we? We have police who look into a crime. We have books and the internet to look into for an answer to a question. We have powerful microscopes to look into to find the smallest of viruses. We have superconductors that split atoms so we can look into them to find the most basic particles in the universe. This past week the Nobel Prize for Medicine was awarded to two women and a man for looking into our cells and finding tiny "molecular-scale structures called telomeres - sometimes likened to the caps at the ends of shoelaces because they keep our genetic material from fraying. As we age, our telomeres inexorably shrink, causing the death of our cells and, eventually, us." How people find such things while looking into our bodies is an exciting mystery to me.

In this light, think of today's scripture lessons as instruments of God causing us to look into our souls and discovering "who" is there. Before we head off on this adventure, we best define the soul as it is used in the Bible. Our soul is not a ghostly thing that floats off to heaven when we die. That idea is from ancient pagan religions. The Bible defines soul as "vitality" or "life." It is the life that is in us. It is our thoughts, actions, spoken and written words and our physical bodies all blended together. Your soul and my soul is who we are in every dimension and all that we do. Our soul is our life. It is the essence of who we are. [Theology of the New Testament](#), Bultmann, pg.s 203-210

I suspect that most of the time we try to hide at least a portion of our souls from other people as they probe into who we are. It can be risky to fully reveal our soul to other people. We do not know how "all we are" will be understood and received by others. Having said this, I really appreciate the stunning way the psalmist in Psalm 22 looked into and poured out his soul for all the world and most particularly God to see. This man was hurting for sure. He cried out, "I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast; my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws." He may have sinned in some manner and felt he was being punished for his sin. He may have been deathly ill. He may have been persecuted for his faith. No matter what, he was hurting and was crying out for help with his whole soul. Have you ever been in this place? Can you identify with this painful cry of this psalmist? When our daughter committed suicide in 1999, I was in this living hell with the psalmist. My whole soul was in the same pain. Jesus was in such a place as he died a soul crushing death on the cross for us. Even he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" What a look into the soul these words reflect, especially from the one who is God with us.

Ah, but the healthy part of the soul of the psalmist, of Jesus, and even myself was that we cried out to the one who seemed to be missing, yet was there to rescue us—God. The psalmist declared, "But you, O LORD, do not be far away! O my help, come quickly to my aid!" and God did. After Jesus cried out in death, he was raised

from the dead by God. It was the ever present grace of God that raised me up from the pit of my grief to live again in this world. How about you, have you cried out to God? Have you found God to be there? The truth is that God never leaves us. I like how the author, William Paul Young, writes about this certainty and realization in his book, The Shack. Check it out. A healthy soul will cry out to the God who is always there.

Another truth about looking into our souls is revealed in the passage from Hebrews. "Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account." The truth is that even though we might not reveal our souls completely to others, the God who created us as souls and is always with us knows what is in us. God knows more about us than we do as we read in the metaphor of marrow and bone. If you have ever looked at bone marrow, you will see that on the sides it is intertwined with the bone. So there is no way we as humans can cleanly separate marrow from bone without taking some of the bone or leaving some marrow. However, God and God's Word to us can cleanly do this as he looks into our souls. Nothing is hidden from God.

This exposure of our souls can be very scary for as Paul wrote in Romans 3, "all have sinned and come short of the glory of God." With God knowing this about our souls, he could rightly condemn us and leave us to waste away with aching bones, dry mouths and dogs to eat our flesh as in the psalm. But what does God do instead? He sends his Son, Jesus, "the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being," to be our high priest to whom we can confess our sins. He understands our "soul" dilemma because he lived with us, was tested by sin as we are, yet he did not sin. Jesus, the great high priest brings us God's mercy, not condemnation. We can approach God, who is the all knowing King of the Universe, and find grace which is unconditional love that's there at all times. We emphasize this each Sunday in our worship services through the confession of sin and assurance of pardon. Trying to hide anything in our souls from God or pretending we can is a waste of our time. Praise God that he can lay bare our souls, and through Jesus Christ grant us his mercy and cleanse us from all of our sins. We also reaffirmed this when we baptized Kalianna Medina. We heard again how God washes away our sins by water and the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Now that we have laid bare what we can of our souls, and God has opened up what is hidden to our eyes, how shall we respond to his presence, mercy and grace, especially as he comes to us in Jesus Christ, "the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being?"

The man in Matthew who ran to Jesus seeking eternal life at least initially demonstrated what God expects us to do. In hope, joy and gratitude, we are to run to Jesus seeking God's gift of eternal life. Ah, but even with his claims of leading a good and Godly life, that man was not ready to receive God's gift of eternal life. There was something blocking his way. His soul was still holding onto the money and goods of this world. Jesus told him to let go of the stuff his soul clung to. "Go do something of

service to God and humanity with all of it, then come and follow me," declared Jesus. Jesus then made it clear with the eye of a needle and camel metaphor that we cannot carry our wealth into eternal life. It will block our passage like excess baggage can as we try to squeeze through the gates of eternal life. We cannot take it with us. Giving our whole life and soul to God in Jesus Christ and to nothing else is how we inherit eternal life. The man ran to Jesus looking for eternal life for his life, his soul, but he was not willing to make the commitment required. Do we have wealth of any kind attached to our souls blocking our way to eternal life? Do we use what we have for God's glory?

Having seen and heard all this, Peter, blurted out, "Hey what about us, we have given up everything and followed you." Jesus responded, "If you have given up or put in second place everyone and everything, and have made serving me number one in your life, even when you are persecuted, then you will receive from God many times over, family and goods in this life, along with being gifted eternal life." We have to make serving Christ our first priority, and the rest will come to us by God's grace.

Roger Rapp sent me a story that illustrates such a commitment. "In January 2004, the Chinese government began a new wave of persecution against house churches. Christians received sentences of up to three years, reported mission agency, Open Doors. Brother Zhong from central China tells of his first imprisonment, which lasted 33 days: All of our house church leaders were arrested in a raid by the National Security Office while we were training them. In prison, our heads were shaved, and we were interrogated for days. We were told that the other inmates were waiting for their chance to beat us up when we were sent to our cells. Up until then, every new prisoner had been beaten up. I entered my cell shaking with fear. It was a fearsome sight: sixteen other prisoners standing in two rows, fists ready. My heart was beating hard, and I prayed rapidly for help.

Suddenly the leader of the gang asked "Why are you here?" "Because I am a Christian," I answered timidly, expecting the first blows. "You don't beat people up?" he asked. "No," I answered. The next question surprised me: "Can you sing?" "Yes," I replied, wondering where this was heading. The gang leader told me to sing. The song "I Give Myself As A Seed" came to mind, so I sang. The words are: *Who doesn't have a brother or sister? Who doesn't have a wife and child? Who doesn't want to be with his family? Who doesn't want to be among His relatives? But if the Lord calls me to carry His Cross, I would ignore Them all, even if they passed by my house.* Tears ran down my cheeks as I sang. The Holy Spirit came in our midst, and half of the other prisoners were in tears when I finished. The leader stepped forward and clapped me on the shoulder. He then asked me to read the gospel to them. They wanted to hear it every day.

One day, when we sang again, a guard came to ask what we were doing, and who was responsible. I stood up and was punished. I had to take off my clothes and stand against the wall in a very uncomfortable position. The leader stood up, demanding the same punishment. The guard became very angry and stormed out of the cell. One of the other inmates became a Christian that day. I was released soon afterward, because my wife managed to pay my bail. My time in prison impaired my

health, but the spiritual gain was worth far more. I am very grateful to God." What a great Christian soul that Chinese man is. PreachingIllustrations.com

As I close, there is one more observation on the man mentioned in Matthew who ran to Jesus. Jesus knew that the man would not let go and give his whole life to following him. Jesus was able to see this man's whole soul, but notice Jesus did not condemn him. "Looking upon him, Jesus loved him." Looking upon our souls, and knowing that we too may not be as committed as he asks or even as the Chinese man was, Jesus does not condemn us, but he loves us. He continually reminds us of what he wants us do with our money, time, talents and relationships. As we then look into our souls and realize we will fail more often than not, we may then ask with the disciples, who among us can be saved? See the face of Jesus as he smilingly looks at us and says, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible." Praise God!