

How is it with your soul? John Wesley, the father of Methodism, used to ask this question his brothers and sisters in faith whenever he gathered in a small group or how they called it back then “class meeting.” You see it was important for John Wesley that persons in faith could engage in such deep conversations about how they were doing in their faith, how their relationship with God was.

How is it with your soul?

It is not just “how are you” that we are so used to respond with “fine” or “good” in passing without any expectation of answering this question for real.

How is it with your soul?

It is the question we do not ask ourselves, let alone asking each other. It implies that we actually take time to stop and ponder for a moment how we are really doing, get in touch with ourselves. Our culture does not invite us into this kind of space. We run and we get busy, we are on our phones all the time, social media, connected to the point that we feel disconnected to ourselves and to God. And not only that, our culture does not value vulnerability. Because if we really answer this question it might mean that we are not fine, we are not ok. It might mean that we feel broken inside or lost. It could mean that nothing is happening in our relationship with God, our faith became stale, go-through-the-motions-faith. Our perceptions of God might stagnate and might even be stuck in the past and never were challenged or addressed.

How is it with your soul, really?

I start with this question, because I think that our passage for this morning, like many passages in the Bible invites us to be honest with ourselves and God, to be vulnerable before God, to search our souls. So, what is happening in these first verses in the 15th chapter of Luke’s Gospel? First, Jesus has been preaching in villages and towns while he was on the way to Jerusalem. He healed many, he forgiven many people’s sins, and he definitely taught many people. And one of the primary ways Jesus did his teaching is by using parables. Parables were stories that connected to the everyday of people’s lives. People could usually easily relate to these stories and identify themselves with the characters in the story.

In the very first verse of the chapter it says that Jesus had a very large crowd following him and listening to his teaching. Now that crowd was not up to par with what the Pharisees and the Scribes would consider appropriate for the one in the Jewish tradition to associate oneself with. For we all know, you are who you surround yourself with. It was a common belief then as it is now. So the Pharisees and the Scribes were grumbling, the text says, that Jesus was devoting his time and his presence to tax collectors and sinners, and not only that, Jesus also received them and welcomed them. These were the very people who were looked down

upon in the society, especially by the religious leaders of the Jewish tradition of that day. There were standards and boundaries that one would not cross to welcome those that were different, smelled bad and did not live their lives according to the set of rules of the Jewish tradition at the time. When Jesus tells this parable of a lost sheep, he tells it in response to this grumble of the Pharisees and the scribes.

“Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them,” Jesus says. Now, I know only one person in our congregation who could actually imagine that because she actually owns the sheep. It is Marge Bennet. The rest of us would not relate to this much. I would relate to the chickens, because my grandma used to have chickens and when I spent my summers in her home I would help her tend to her chicks and chickens. But our parable is about sheep. Actually, I really want to focus on the shepherds a little bit now, the shepherds from the Biblical times. We always talk about the sheep, how stupid they are, but today I invite you to look with me at the shepherds. First, they were also looked down upon. They were sort of the outcast of the society. Second, shepherding was their work. It is what they did day in and day out. Their income and their livelihood depended on sheep. We know from some of the historical sources that shepherds were always on the lookout for the sheep that was sick or not well, the sheep that would need the shepherd’s personal attention. One source talks about how a little lamby might suffer from the strong and bright sunlight or scratches from the thorns. For that reason shepherds would always carry some olive oil on them to attend to those wounds. Also shepherds would always go out and search for the one lost sheep without a problem.

I am so used to the interpretation that it would be so radical for a shepherd to leave 99 sheep and go search for that one that is lost. And yes, it might seem not logical, but what I found out as I did some research on this passage is that it was actually very common for the shepherds to leave the 99 and search for one lost sheep. Often times the shepherds would know each other and they would collaborate and look for each other’s sheep while the other goes to find the lost one. So, it was not a radical and shocking thing for a shepherd to do - to go and search for one sheep leaving the flock behind. It was a matter of fact. It was normal. Then when the sheep was found, the shepherd gently would put this lamby on his shoulder, bring it to the flock and he would rejoice and his other shepherd friends would rejoice with him.

In his teaching Jesus always wanted to point out to the reality of God, to the nature of God that sent him for the ministry of love and sacrifice. Jesus’s whole ministry, especially in the Gospel of Luke, was about breaking the boundaries of societal norms and welcoming those that did not meet the standards of the Jewish

law, those who were poor and outcast. Now, it is not a shocker that the character of the shepherd in this story represents God and the nature of God. But what is striking is that this image of God that Jesus was pointing to was very different from that one that the Scribes and the Pharisees had. It seems to me that the Pharisees and the Scribes and Jesus had quite different perceptions of who God was and they lived their lives in accordance with these perceptions. The Pharisees and the Scribes saw God as judgemental, with very strict boundaries, there were people in and people out, they saw God as the god of the found only. The perception of God that Jesus had and always pointed to is the God that lives with sinners; the God that hanging out with the outcasts of the society; the God that goes out and searches for those who are lost, the God of the lost.

Don't get me wrong, I am not saying that the Jewish people of Jesus' times or our times got the wrong picture of God. I am saying that this could happen to all of us. We all can easily get side-tracked, and be lost in the images of God that were presented to us whether when we were children or later in life and we could continue living with this image of God in our heads and hearts without even realizing it.

My husband, Josh and I have a friend, who is an amazing organist and who has been working at a church playing the organ most of his life. Whenever we get together for dinner, he would always remind me that he is an atheist. He grew up in a very judgemental religious environment. His teachers were very strict. He always felt that he had done something wrong. And since his childhood he perceived God in this way: as judgemental, not loving, God of wrath and hell. He decided that he did not want to believe in this kind of God and became an atheist. I would always tell him that I do not believe in this kind of God either. Our conversations would always end with him saying that he wished I was his pastor when he was growing up. That recently made me think about my perception of God. I find myself lost between two images of God.

I sat with my spiritual director a few days ago. By the way, spiritual directors are those who help others look deeply into their souls and seek together how God is working in their lives and their ministries. Often times spiritual directors work with pastors, spiritual leaders and those who are involved in ministry. Sometimes they are called pastors to the pastors. They create this space to sit in and listen deeply to God's spirit. Basically, they ask us the question every time we meet, "How is it with your soul?" So last time I met with my spiritual director, I realized that I possibly have believed in two gods. She said, "tell me more." I used adjectives to describe those two gods. I said there is this one god, that is very demanding and judgemental, and it is tight, packed, and filled with anxiety. It was like there is no space to breathe with this kind of god. It is the god of busy, the god of not enough,

the god of stale faith. And I am not quite sure when and where I picked up on this god.

And then she asked me about the other god. When I opened my mouth, tears started falling down my cheeks. And after a few deep breaths, I said, “This other God is loving, free-flowing and a beautiful Spirit. This God is so vast, that there is so much space and there is room for everyone. This God is as majestic as the Universe, yet so intimate, and knows our very own hearts. This God that knows our deepest desires. This God knows how lost and broken we feel. This God is the God of freedom.” Our session continued as well as my reflection on this. And I invite you into this reflection with me. I don’t think I was talking about two gods. I think I was talking about two images of God. You see Jesus by living out his life of love pointed out to the image of God that I was talking about in my spiritual direction session. It is in this parable he used the image of the shepherd, loving, caring, always ready to heal the wounds, and to run after his flock. This is the Old Testament image, a beloved image of the Jewish faith. It is written in the prophet Isaiah, “Like a shepherd he will shepherd his own drove. With his arm he will collect together the lambs; and in his bosom he will carry them.” The 23rd psalm that comforts us so much, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.”

And it is through Jesus that we know of God’s overwhelming, never-ending, reckless love, as God came into this world in a human body and lived a life full of love and sacrifice. And this is the God that we are all seeking; the God we are all longing for; the God that we deeply want to know; the God that we all desire to find and to be found by. I wish my and my husband’s friend knew and experienced this kind of God. This God that Jesus points to is the one always has an open invitation, invitation to all. When we enter in this God’s presence, God says, “You are enough, you are loved.”

So, friends, how is it with your soul? What are we overwhelmed with these days? What is that tighten up your breath? What is it that makes your feasts clench? How is your faith? What kind of image of God do we all have? What kind of image of God do we present to others in our lives? These are the questions of invitation for us today. You can do this kind of deep spiritual work by taking a walk outside, or writing in your journal if it is your habit. Or you can do in your beloved community in small groups, one on one conversations.

I am going to leave you with this image on the screen and invite you to silently look at it. (\*Image of Jesus holding a sheep next to his heart)