

Epiphany Sermon Series: Holy Connections- Soul Talk

Sermon Title: "Claimed"

Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22; Acts 8:14-17

Salem United Methodist Church; January 13, 2019

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Epiphany, the season that follows Christmas, is the season of revelations, of getting to know God in Christ in new ways. For this Epiphany season we are focusing on connecting with the Holy in our soul.

Do you ever feel like life is a rat race? Every moment of every day seems to be filled with things that must get done because tomorrow has its own set of things that must get done. And then there are all the screens that seem to chirp or beep at us for attention. We have texts, emails, and messages that have to be answered, NOW! The stress builds up over time and can begin to wear us down. Before we know it, we are taking our stress out on other drivers, or the dog, or our children, or our spouses, or ourselves. We begin to ask, "What's the point? What's the purpose?" A man sought out a wise old owl and asked the owl, "What is the purpose of life?" The owl answered, "The purpose of life is to find a purpose for your life." I would agree with the owl. We all need to find our purpose in life, not just once, but in each stage of our lives. My purpose in life is different now than it was when I was in my twenties. And I suspect my purpose will be different again when I am in my eighties.

One way to find purpose as well as de-stress from the rat race is to have a talk with your soul. Rev. Kirk Jones wrote in his book, *Soul Talk*, that the soul is "the part of you God held last just before releasing your free flight into the world." There is no scriptural reference to this. However, Psalm 139 does talk about God knitting us together in our mother's womb. I like to think of the soul as the image of God that God placed in each human being. There is a scriptural reference for this in Genesis 1. Our souls are a connection point with God. For a lamp to produce light, it has to be plugged into an electric receptacle. The soul is the plug that goes into the receptacle of the Holy. When we plug our soul into the Holy our lives can light up, too. Plugging into God or soul talk is about showing up and allowing God to transform our lives. Rev. Jones describes soul talk as a process of seven transformative steps. 1) Be Still, 2) Lay Burdens Down, 3) Listen Deeply, 4) Don't Run Away, 5) Be Honest, 6) Be Gentle, 7) Welcome New Truth. Another name for soul talk is contemplative prayer. Some will call this their quiet time with God. Often when we pray we have our list of concerns we lift up to God. Soul talk is not this. Soul talk is letting go and leaving room for God to create new life in us. Soul talk is tapping into the wonder of God, the limitless wisdom, peace, love, and joy of God. Soul talk begins with being still with God. And there is a Bible verse for that. "Be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10).

The soul is also the place where God's assists us in discerning the good, important stuff from the stuff that needs to be discarded. The souls is the place where God's winnowing fork helps us separate out the wheat kernels (important stuff) from the husks (stuff that needs to be discarded). In ancient times before there were machines that separated the wheat kernels from the husks, the harvested wheat would be taken to the threshing floor to be cleaned. The cleaning process did not involve water. Washing the kernels would cause the grain to mold. The cleaning process involved a tool that looked like a big fork. The harvester would scoop up a fork full of wheat, and throw it up in the air to allow the wind to blow the husk off the kernels. The husks would blow away and the kernels would fall to the floor. When they were finished the important stuff, the wheat kernels, were gathered up and ground into flour. There husks or chaff had no use, so it was gathered up and burned. John the Baptist recognized Jesus with the Holy Spirit to be the One who would assist people with separating the good stuff from the stuff that needs to be discarded.

John is the one who prepares the way for the people to receive Jesus. Baptizing them with water was one way to do this. In early Judaism, cleansing one's self with water was necessary to worship God,

especially at the Temple. The Temple had pools of cool water that flowed in and out of the pools at the Temple, living water, not stagnant water. The pools were there for people to wash themselves after their hot, dusty pilgrimage. There was also a Jewish tradition of baptism when someone converted to Judaism. So John didn't invent baptism, but he was transforming it. His water baptism was preparing the way for the baptism that Jesus would do by the Holy Spirit and fire. Fire is one of the images of the Holy Spirit. Wind is also. Both wind and fire are included in this analogy of separating the chaff from the wheat kernels. The wind blows the chaff or the waste away. The fire burns it. When we are being still with God part of this process to listen deeply so that the Holy Spirit can blow away the chaff in our lives and get rid of it, so new life can grow.

The story of John the Baptist is in all four Gospels. All four also tell the Crucifixion and Resurrection story. So the baptism of Jesus must have been pretty important for the Gospel writers. Luke, however, is the only one who has Jesus praying after he is baptized by John. What happened when Jesus prayed? Verse 21-22: "While he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit came down on him in bodily form like a dove. And there was a voice from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in whom I am well pleased." What do you think Jesus was praying? Did he have a list of concerns? I don't think so. Jesus was going to his quiet spot within, his soul, and connecting with God. He was soul talking and God showed up in a very big way for Jesus. God was both visible and audible. Wow! Jesus' baptism is a very special Holy Connectional Moment. This is the only time in the Bible that the Holy Spirit (dove), Father God (voice), and Jesus (Son) is mentioned together. Jesus showed up. And God blessed him. God is with us all the time, but if we don't show up, we will miss our holy moments with God.

Towards the end of Jesus' ministry he commissioned his disciples to go, make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We witness them baptizing in the Book of Acts. They baptized with water and the Spirit. From that time until today the church has been baptizing people. Baptism in the United Methodist tradition is considered a sacred moment of Holy Connection. It is an outward sign (the water) of an inward grace (connection with the Holy). The United Methodist Church recognizes all baptisms from other Christian faiths and we baptize people of any age. But we do not re-baptize. We believe that God is the one who is baptizing. And to baptize again is saying God didn't get it right the first time. Instead, we are reminded to, "Remember our baptism and be thankful." We may not remember the exact moment of our baptism, especially if we were baptized as a baby. To remember our baptism is to reflect on where and how God has been with a part of our lives, blessing our lives. Baptism is a holy connection of God's grace that says, "You are mine. I claim you. And I was with you before you were born. I will be with you throughout your life and beyond." That's God's part in baptism. We have a part, too. In turn, we claim God in Jesus Christ. We claim Jesus as our Lord and Savior. We claim to put our whole faith and trust in the grace of Jesus, and we promise to serve him. In addition we promise to reject evil and wickedness. We repent of our sin which means we have not done God's will, but seek to do so. And we accept the gift of freedom and power that God gives us to do good and resist evil, injustice, and oppression.

In this New Year of 2019 as in the sixth century BCE-the time of the exiled Israelites- evil, injustices, and oppression are wreaking havoc in nation and world. Chaos and wickedness seem to be everywhere. Our doubts and fears are as real as they were to the exiled Israelites. God reassured them with these words, "Do not fear, for I am with you." Soul talk is a way to hear God's words once again- to not fear and know God is with us. Connecting with the Holy will also empower us to go out and overcome evil with good, right the injustices, and work for those who are oppressed. I invite you to take this Epiphany journey with me as we learn together how to connect with the Holy in the space of our soul.

Resources: *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 4*, David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds.; *Soul Talk* by Kirk Byron Jones

