

**Epiphany Sermon Series: Holy Connections- Soul Talk**  
**Sermon Title: “Quiet Uncluttering”**  
**Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Psalm 62:5-8; Psalm 46:8-11; Luke 4:14-21**  
**Salem United Methodist Church; January 27, 2019**  
**Rev. Dr. Sue Shorb-Sterling**

We are in the season of Epiphany, the season of getting to know God in Christ in new ways. This Epiphany we are connecting with the Holy in the depths of our soul through a seven step process described in Bryon Kirk Jones’ book, *Soul Talk*. They are: 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. Each is an important step to discover something new about God in Christ, as well as something new about ourselves. This morning I will focus on the first two steps: Be Still and Lay Burdens Down.

When I was a little girl, I had trouble sitting still in church. Our church didn’t have a nursery. Children were expected to be still in church. This was no easy task for me. I wanted to turn around and look at the people sitting behind me. I wanted to stand up on the pew or slide under the pew. This behavior was met with a swift pat on the bottom and hands grabbing my shoulders to sit me in the pew. I have to admit I still have trouble sitting quietly without fidgeting. Anyone else have this problem? Sitting still and having a quiet time contradicts our busy, noisy culture which values the making of lists, getting things done, and filling all the empty spaces and time with stuff. And we wonder why we are always tired, weary, and running on empty. Spending time in quietness to connect with God is not valued. There are no advertisements about spending time in quiet and doctors do not write prescriptions to connect with our souls. Yet, there is value in blocking out the cacophony of our lives. Jones wrote in *Soul Talk*, “Your soul will not compete with other voices in order to be heard. Your soul will wait patiently for you to choose to offer the attention of your silence and stillness.”

Before we delve any further into being still, perhaps we need to define, the soul. Some say the soul is the mind, the place where thinking occurs. In fact the word for soul in Greek is *psyche* from which we get the word, psychology. If the soul is the mind, then biologically speaking, the soul resides in the brain. There are those who would argue that the soul is more than the ability for our brain to think. The soul is the essence of who we are. The Hebrew word translated into the English word, soul, is *nephesh*, which means our whole being, everything that gives us life. *Nephesh* is mentioned more times in the Hebrew texts than in the New Testament. Just in the Psalms alone, soul is mentioned nearly 80 times. One of the first times soul is mentioned in the Bible is in Deuteronomy 6:5, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (or strength, depending on the interpretation.) To love God with our heart, soul, might and/or strength is to love God with your whole being. The Gospel writers have Jesus quoting this scripture as, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength,” perhaps a more complete explication for our whole being. Our souls are important to God. Jones defines the soul as “the part of you God held last just before releasing your free flight into the world.” We might not be able to physically point to our soul, but when we quiet ourselves, center ourselves, we can discover or uncover our soul. We will be able to identify our soul when we stop to focus on it. Then we will know the true essence of who we are.

Howard Thurman, a twentieth century African-American theologian, wrote, “There is something that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself. It is the only true guide you will ever have. And if you cannot hear it, you will all of your life spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls.” How do we “listen to the sound of the genuine?” How do we get in touch with the essence of who we are? And when we do, are we willing to be vulnerable to all that we are, both known and unknown? My sense is that one of the reasons we do not quiet ourselves to get in touch with our souls is that we are afraid of what we will discover there. Jones also writes, “Your soul is your hidden reservoir of limitless wisdom, peace, and joy.” If so, why would we not want to dip into this reservoir?

Be still. This is challenging to sit quietly for one minute. Being still and focusing so we can listen to our souls takes practice. Here are some suggestions we can practice being still. Sit comfortably. Take deep breaths

to slow down your breathing. Our bodies and souls are connected. Some find closing the eyes helps to block out distractions while others will focus on a burning candle or something in nature. Then focus on an image of serenity. Psalm 23 talks about the Good Shepherd leading us beside the still waters. Imagine being led to the still waters. For some to be still, they need complete silence, while others like listening to soothing music or the sounds of nature. Another way to quiet the soul is to repeat a scripture passage such as, “Be still, my soul.” As you practice this you may find that one minute turns into two and two into three. The amount of time to spend in quietness is up to the individual. Time is not the concern here. Stillness is. Jones writes, “Stillness yields space to sense our vast inner wealth, harness vital energy for genuine transformation, and experience satisfying and empowering soul contentment. Stillness sensitizes us to the nudges and whispers of the Holy Spirit and our sacred inner wisdom.” He also writes in a poem called Morning BREW: “Be Still. Receive God’s Love. Embrace Yourself. Welcome the New Day.” Being still is the first step in this process of connecting with one’s soul.

Once we are still, we may find that we bring our concerns, worries, and as Jones calls them, encumbrances into this space. Some have reported that they can’t meditate because all the stuff that needs doing keeps going over and over in their minds. Unburdening ourselves of our concerns and worries, setting them aside, uncluttering our thinking, or laying our burdens down is the second step in this process. Our burdens can be heavy ones and weigh us down. As we move into stillness, thoughts or images of problems at the job or in our relationships, thoughts about our future or our health, as well as other worries do challenge the stillness. The second step is trusting the process of surrendering, setting these aside, or dropping our burdens. Find an image that works for you. Visualize each one. Name them. And set them aside. Imagine putting them into one bag and setting it aside. Or naming each and putting them on a shelf. Jones uses the image of an empty bowl. He places an empty bowl in front of him and imagines himself to be empty like the bowl. Laying our burdens down is about letting go of thinking and emptying the mind. Jones writes, “Non-thinking opens the door to new thinking.” As we enter into the space of non-thinking, we are invited to linger, to spend time in this quiet, non-thinking space with no specific agenda and feel a sense of lightness, of freedom, and restoration. Enjoy the moment. This is our time to linger with God. Our burdens will wait. And when we return to them, we may just see them differently.

As I read the scripture from Nehemiah, I sensed the gathered people were collectively going through this process of being still and unburdening. They came to connect with their collective soul by quietly listening to the reading of scripture. They were so moved that they lifted their hands up to the Lord and praised God with a collective, “Amen.” Then they fell to their knees and prayed. As their souls were touched, they began to cry. Jones writes that when our souls are touched, tears may flow. We should not ignore the tears that come. As we unburden, tears can be a release. Tears can be cleansing, as well as healing. Ezra may have recognized this. The people had been there most of the day connecting with God in hearing the scriptures and praying. This was not a 60 minute worship service! Ezra recognizes that the time they spent together was a holy time, a healing time for a people that felt that they experienced God’s punishment. And it should be celebrated with food. This is the first coffee hour! There was more to this than coffee and cake. This was a celebration! And in their celebrating they were not to forget with those who had no food. Serving others or having the desire and strength to serve others is a certain outcome of connecting with the Holy. After the testing of Jesus which was a type of soul talk, he was filled with the Holy Spirit. He knew that his mission was all about serving and declared it. There is another outcome of connecting with the Holy, receiving joy. As we repeatedly connect with the Holy in the comfort of our souls, we will come to know as Ezra did that no matter what happens, “The Joy of the Lord is Our Strength.” We need the strength of the Lord every moment of every day. And as we receive this strength during our quiet times, we will find joy.

**Challenge:** Practice being still and lay your burdens down at least one time this week.

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

