

***Epiphany Sermon Series: Holy Connections- Soul Talk***  
***Sermon Title: "Being Honest and Being Gentle"***  
***Job 10:1-7; Psalm 25:1-9; Matthew 11:28-29***  
***Salem United Methodist Church; February 17, 2019***  
***Rev. Dr. Sue Shorb-Sterling***

This Epiphany season is longer than usual and we are still talking about the process of connecting with the Holy in the depths of our soul based on a book by Kirk Bryon Jones, *Soul Talk*. In his book Jones outlines seven 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. Why would we want to learn this practice? So we can gain clarity into who God is and how much God loves us. Also, so we can gain new clarity for our lives, receive guidance for our questions and challenges, and be empowered to live according to God's purposes for us. We have already talked about being still, laying our burdens down, listening deeply, and avoiding the temptation to run away when we don't want to face certain truths about ourselves. Today we are covering the next two steps: Being Honest and Being Gentle.

Thomas Moore published a book in 1994 called, *Care for the Soul*. His opening line reads, "The great malady of the twentieth century, implicated by all our troubles and affecting us individually as well as socially is 'loss of the soul.' When the soul is neglected, it doesn't just go away; it appears symptomatically in obsessions, addictions, violence, and loss of meaning. Our temptation is to isolate these symptoms or try to eradicate them one by one; but the root problem is that we have lost the wisdom about the soul, even the interest in it." I would say that this is still a great malady of the twenty-first century, too. We can be obsessed about politics, community affairs, family issues, relationships, health, acquiring more money and more material things. Concern about these things is different from focusing on these all the time. That's obsession. We are still addicted to the obvious ones, such as alcohol, drugs, sex, and gambling, but an addiction is anything that controls one's life: work, shopping, video games, phones, or the need to control everything. We still have violence which can so easily erupt when we are frustrated, mistreated, and angered. And as we have seen in the Book of Job, when we suffer a loss that living can become meaningless.

Caring for our souls, taking time to be quiet and spend time with God can be the medicine we need to refocus our lives on what is truly important. During our quiet time, God can show us what we feel good about, what our desires and passions are, and assist us in finding God's will for our lives, confirm that we are what God wants us to be, and/or that we are doing what God wants us to do. These moments with God are sheer joy! However, caring for our souls is not always joyful. As was mentioned last week, sometimes we end up confronting things we would rather not confront and we want to run away. During our quiet times, God can also confront those areas in our lives that need to be cleaned up, that need some work, those areas where we may harm others in words and deeds. God confronts us to make us aware. Then God gives us the freedom to decide if we want to face it or run away. If we chose to run away, God will confront us again when we may be more ready to face it. When we face whatever the issue is we need to be honest with ourselves. We have to admit that there is an issue. We have to face the reality within ourselves. Being honest is not about making excuses. Excuses don't cut it with God. Making excuses is escaping the issue. Being honest is using the sanctity of the soul as a place of trust and confession. Confession can be anything from, "I'm sorry, God. Change me," to yelling at God, or crying out our pain with "Why God?" or "How long, O Lord?" Our anger, our tears, all of our feelings matter to God. The soul is a safe place to share our inner most secrets with God. God already knows, and rejoices when we have the courage to be honest with ourselves and trust God with our feelings.

The entire book of Job is one long process of being honest with God. Job's new reality of losing his wealth, his health, and his children through death is seen through the lens of the popular theology of the time that God rewards those who are good with prosperity and punishes those who are bad. Job repeatedly states that he has done nothing wrong, yet his pride that he was a good man doing good things remains. His friends give him poor and unhelpful advice. Job is brutally honest with his friends and brutally honest with God. Out of his

anger, Job demands an audience with God, and God responds, but not with a defensive argument. God comes in a whirlwind asking a litany of questions about who Job is in relationship to who God is. The questioning is humbling, makes Job think, and breaks through Job's pride and his pain. At the end of the book, Job sees both himself and God in a new way. God reminded Job that God is always present with us even in the difficult times. Facing the reality of who we are in comparison to God is humbling. Yet the God who commands the morning, enters the storehouses of snow and hail, sets the stars in the sky, can also put wisdom in our inward parts and give understanding to our minds. These words are spoken by God to Job. God can meet us in our souls and give us rest from all the stress, the pain, the struggles, the guilt, and the questioning that may reside within.

Another time in the Bible when someone was brutally honest with God was Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Knowing what would take place the next day, Jesus went to an olive garden where he could see the hill that would hold his cross. He just finished celebrating the Passover Meal with his disciples in the Upper Room when Judas goes off to betray him. Jesus could have stayed in the Upper Room with the rest of the disciples and napped until Judas came with the soldiers to arrest him, but he needed some soul time with God. So he goes to the garden to be honest with God. He prays, "I don't want to do this! Take this cup from me! I can't drink it." Scripture doesn't tell us how God responds, but scripture does tell us that when the soldiers came for Jesus, he was ready to go with them. During his brutally honest soul talk with God, Jesus received wisdom, strength, and grace to face a human execution so he could divinely save the world and be resurrected so we could have new life.

When Jesus resurrected from the dead, he didn't arise victorious like a mighty general that won a battle, but in each one of his Resurrection encounters with the disciples, he was gentle. Jesus greeted Mary lovingly. He listened deeply to the grief of the two disciples walking home after the Crucifixion. He is gracious with Thomas and his doubts. He gently reassures Peter who denied him. The Resurrected Christ is full of grace, acceptance, encouragement, unconditional love, and new possibilities. We live in a culture that is about doing more, being more, pushing, proving, climbing new heights, going and going until one drops. In the midst of this, we hear the words of Jesus to come with all of our burdens and he will give us rest. For he is gentle and humble in heart. In him we can find rest for our souls. We live in a culture that when we are stressed and anxious, we take a pill or a glass of alcohol to help us relax. Have we forgotten that one of the ways to de-stress is to spend time with gentle Jesus? He is the grace that can calm our fears and take away the stress. Even Jesus needed this grace and the person that gave it to him was Mary. As he was preparing to go to the cross, she quietly and gently anointed his feet with an expensive oil. Jesus doesn't shew her away as Judas recommends, but settles in to savor the moment. Even Jesus needed to receive and in that receiving he was strengthened so he could give his life for us. Mary's oil was a gift of grace to Jesus. When were you on the receiving end of God's grace?

Taking the time to connect with the Holy in our souls, to be still, to unburden, to listen, and to deal with what needs to be dealt with, allows us to receive God's gentle gift of grace. We all need God's grace to give us strength to stand and keep going. Jones tells of a time after Franklin D. Roosevelt was paralyzed, two men were helping him to stand. One was on either side of him holding him up. It was obvious that if the men had let him go, FDR would have fallen to the floor. Jones writes, "We all need God's grace to stand. When God offers you such grace, take it again, again, and again."

When we spend time with God, we will be shown the places within ourselves where we can be and do better. It may be a concern that we have forgotten. It may be something that is not settled within us. It may be a conviction that needs to be refocused. It may be the pain of a broken relationship or a loss, but God will be there offering us a gentle touch, a gentle word of forgiveness, a gentle act of grace that remakes us into being and doing better or that gives us the courage to stand and face the future. When we spend time with God, we will experience a love greater than any love in the world.

**Resources:** *Soul Talk* by Kirk Byron Jones; *Care of the Soul* by Thomas Moore

