

What is the key to keeping one's soul healthy?

Psalm 1; John 17:6-19

We love, as humans, to escape. Which is why COVID has been so difficult for many of us. It's hard to escape the realities of the world that we are living in right now. Oh, how we long to travel. To find paradise. To see a different part of the world. To learn about other people. Maybe we're longing to lie on a nice, warm beach. Dip our toes in the ocean. Some of us even love to fly on airplanes, just because we get to go somewhere and feel that exhilaration of being away from what is our normal life.

The desire to escape is tied often to our longing to be restored. We want to feel relaxed again; we want to be relieved of our anxieties, of our pain, of our worries, and of our fears. Sometimes the only time we unplug from the world is when we go away. When we are on vacation we often turn off the news. Maybe you're tired of listening to it. Maybe you don't want to hear anymore about how some people, some leaders are choosing to act in a way that benefits themselves and not for the common good.

As we come to the end of the liturgical season of Easter, we need to take time to reflect on what we've learned. As I said, we've been asked the question, 'Is it well with our soul?' How will we know if it's well with our soul? Is our soul well when it feels like we do when we come back from vacation? You know that sense of being at peace, ready to engage the world again? Is it restored by escaping from this reality that we're living in? Or is Jesus the Christ offering us something much more?

The passage from the gospel of John is a prayer. Jesus is praying for his disciples and for his faithful followers. Jesus is asking God to provide both the disciples and all the faithful followers with revelation, with providence, and sanctification. Both Jesus and the psalmist today provide us with the key to a balanced soul. They provide us with a path that leads to wellness and wholeness. What is being claimed in the scriptures today is that "if we are to return to right relationship with God, we will receive divine assistance, and that is precisely what Christ is providing us."¹ Christ offers us an alternative model that provides us with a way to not succumb to the values and pressures that we experience in the world each day. Our soul is healthy and well when we remain connected to God, and act on our faith in accordance with the teachings us

¹ David S. Cunningham, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 2, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008, p. 544.

Christ. What we can trust is that God is revealed to us in Jesus. Everything that Jesus says and does speaks to who God is. We know this because Jesus said in the passage of John today, ‘I have made Your name (that’s God’s name) known to those who you gave me from the world. They know now that I have come from you.’ Jesus then prays to God to give us providence. Jesus is now handing over the protection of the faithful followers to God. Asking God to be our guardian again, to protect us and care for us, and to make abundant provision for our needs. God is not passive. God is active, active in this world right now. Jesus says, ‘Creator God, protect them in the name you’ve given me so that they may be one as we are one. I protected them, I guarded them, but now I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves.’ God is revealed to us through Jesus, and Jesus prays for providence.

Jesus doesn’t finish there, though; Jesus then prays for our sanctification. And in this prayer, Jesus doesn’t speak about making sure that we are doing good deeds. Jesus’ purpose is wider. Jesus is asking God to set us apart from the world for God’s purpose. Not to be somewhere else, to be set apart. Jesus is praying for our holiness. “Jesus prays that his followers will be sanctified and made holy; set apart so that we may bring the good news to the world.”²

So what does this all mean for us? We are being called to live in relationship with one another as Jesus did with the disciples and all the people and the world. We are being called to live as *God* would want us to, not as the world tries to tell us to. We are called to show mutual support to one another. We are called to give space to one another and to allow one another to live into fullness within a loving community of care. Our soul is well when we are loving one another and when we are being kind to one another in this world. As we move towards Pentecost Sunday, which will be next week, and the birth of the church as we know it, Jesus and God are sending us into the world. We are being asked, and provided with the support and protection, to then engage the world, not to give in to the distorted powers and pressures, but to engage it in a way that God would want. In a way that brings about peace, respect, harmony, and most importantly, justice. Jesus offers the disciples “an alternative model that can empower the community to live in the world without succumbing to its powers and pressures. We are to stay in the world under the protection and care of God, to live amidst the knotted complexities of the world without themselves getting entangled.”³

So again, how do we do this? If COVID has taught us anything, it’s how to make space – physical space – for each other. How do we make space for people to live faithfully, to be a part of this community of faith? What will help us not place our expectations onto others? What will stop us from seeing others as stepping on our toes or on our turf? What will stop us from feeling threatened by others’ gifts and talents? How will we make space for people in the community to engage their faith without fear, without worry, without judgment?

² _____, p. 548.

³ Thomas Troeger, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 2, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008, p. 547

We need to know that we need each other. We can't do this alone. That's why we're called a community of faith. We need each other, and we need to protect, care for, love, and make space so that our souls can live out what God is calling us to do. The psalmist teaches us that "we need to be wise in action, In choices, in character, and in our lived ethos in relationship to God."⁴

In our weekly Scripture Reflections, we say the same prayer each week, and one of the lines that always catch my attention is this: 'God help us to give up patterns and structures that enslave us and others.' What are patterns of negativity that we live out, that end up putting up barriers instead of taking them down? What past practices do we need to let go of in order for our lives to thrive? And how will we come to appreciate the differences between us so that we can live, as Jesus said, as one, as God would want us to? For our soul to be well, we need to make God the centre of our lives. We need to follow the path that leads to righteousness. A path that follows the teachings and practices of Jesus where we care for other people no matter who they are, no matter what they have done or not done. When we follow this path, our souls will be filled with joy – with fruitfulness and purpose – and blessings will abound.

Thomas Troeger, who is a writer whom I love...he is a minister, he is a theologian, he is a creative energy in this world, and he states the following:

'This passage from John presents us with something more enduring than a good vacation, a sense of Christ's presence that will allow us to live vitally and faithfully in the world; not owned by it, but fully engaged with its needs and wounds and energized by the truth of God's word. By the truth that was sent into the world so that we might have a more abundant life here and now.'⁵

May Jesus be our guide today. May his prayers, answered by God, give us a path forward to make the world what God wanted it to be. To act in ways that Jesus would act. Let us love one another as we have been loved. Our heart, mind, our body, and our soul. May your soul be well this day. Amen.

⁴ Sakena Young-Scaggs, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 2, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008, p. 532.

⁵ Thomas Troegen, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 2, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008, p.549.