

Soul Restoration

Psalm 23

Good Shepherd Sunday

Slide: X-Ray

I'm always amazed at what doctors can tell you by a simple test. Usually, you would think that complex tests are needed to show something, like having a PET scan or MRI, or even contrast dye to see what exactly an organ is doing. But, often the simplest test is the best.

Take the X-ray. X-rays are a form of electromagnetic radiation, similar to visible light. Unlike light, however, x-rays have higher energy and can pass through most objects, including the body. Medical x-rays are used to generate images of tissues and structures inside the body. Unfortunately, I have had several within the last year, both with a back fracture and fracture of the neck of the humerus (that's the shoulder). Not as humorous as it turns out, but still, many an X-ray later, you can see how a fracture goes from very visible line to a lot of white fluffiness surrounding the fracture, showing increased healing of the area. Fortunately for me, my fractures have all healed rapidly and fully. Arm flexibility is not yet 100% but is IS getting there.

With all the diagnostic tests I have had these last months, the simple tests that were done to determine disease were all very simple tests. It's amazing to me what medical science is able to do today through many and various means to determine physical health. This led me to thinking about whether or not we do this kind of "simple testing" to determine our spiritual health. How many of you actually wonder about your spiritual health after all? I know I often think about mine. Given what I do, many things can affect the health of my spiritual life. What if we could hook ourselves up to a machine to show whether our spiritual health was shabby and out of shape, or healthy, pumping out just the right amount of being in tune with God.

Slide: Soul Restoration

As it turns out, we do have something pretty simple, although the concept is complex and in a way, so is the access, in that the action of the Holy Spirit is not a simple thing. We already have been gifted the Holy Spirit at our baptisms, so in simplicity, Christ is always there with us. This Spirit of Christ resides within us and often attempts to communicate our healthy or unhealthy soul action. But, it's complex because so many voices other than God's reside within us. When we are able to listen past the clutter, we then can have clearer view of God's longings for us. This is called discernment in spiritual circles.

But, for today, let's call this restoring the soul or Soul Restoration. After all, Psalm 23 is a big part of this Sunday which is often coined as Good Shepherd Sunday. This is the day we remind ourselves that Christ does restore our souls. Christ does lead us. And, the voice of Christ is calling out for us in relationship. When we listen to his voice, we are able to better discern. St. John's is in a time of discernment right now. No doubt, we all are on a path towards that direction, but as individuals, we also have times of soul restoration in our decision making. What I have discovered along the way in my own faith journey is that I am in constant need of allowing my soul to be restored. As my physical health can be not the best at times with chronic illness, so can my soul health.

Slide: Too many voices

And, this world does not help. This world as it is can be very destructive to our soul health. The world God created is of course beautiful and full of diversity. But, the voices we tend to listen to are often voices of power, of falsehood, or are simply just misguided. When it comes to those voices, that part of the world depletes our spiritual health. It can suck it dry if you let it. That's why all of us, just like a doctor may prescribe something for physical illness, we need a prescription for spiritual illnesses and we need a way to manage that illness. We, all of us need soul restoration.

In Psalm 23, we get a picture of a person who knows what it is to get spiritual relief from the disease of a restlessness of the soul. The person who wrote this Psalm was not a person without difficulty. We know this because in the psalm we hear of dark valleys of death and having enemies, enemies who ultimately you will be seated next to at a table. This is a person who is in need of soul restoration.

I know a few of you who like to restore cars, mostly old cars. I have seen the painstaking effort it takes to restore something to new life. I have seen how a particular car may be slowly and lovingly restored piece by piece...and it's still not done. But the process of restoration is almost more important than having the restoration completed. A work in progress, after all, is not just what we do to restore other things, but also ourselves.

We, too, are a restoration effort that is in process at all times. Even when we are spiritually fulfilled, we still lose that sense. And, especially if we are starting from scratch, having never tried out worship before or ever having opened a Bible, the process is still the same. It takes time, effort, and a desire to become connected to the God who longs to be.

Slide: Heart Cloud

And, quite frankly, we need it. We are not merely physical creatures. Knowing that we are loved by God and saved by God means that of course that we really don't have to do anything to be loved or redeemed, but if we do nothing to be in relationship with the one who does love us, the opposite problem is that we will feel and act as if we are not redeemed people. We will also believe that others are not. As I tell my confirmation students, a relationship with God isn't just something God wants. It's something we enter into because we need God. God does not need our worship but we need God. That relationship is vital for our spirit.

How do we do this? Well, I suppose I could give another prescription for soul restoration, but it's not an easy thing. It is quite

easy to say, but I know just how like a diet, a lifestyle change, the practices of soul health take effort. So, I'd like to just put out some simple ways we find some health for our whole spiritual selves:

1. The Bible – It is our book of faith. But, let's face it. We don't read it. Ok now I know that some of us do read it, but on a whole in today's world, we read it less and less. And, our reasons may be that it's too hard, or we can't understand it, or it's not fascinating enough, or we don't have time. But, if we don't read our Book of Faith, it can be tough to grow a relationship. If you would like help in how to read the Bible, please come and talk to me...I won't look at you googly eyed or like you are dumb. The Bible is a very intimidating thing, so I understand completely!
2. Help the neighbor. And, if you are especially in a difficult time in life, look at someone who is also having difficulty and help them. You will be amazed how "loving your neighbor" will lead to soul restoration. You will want to do more once you have done it.
3. Prayer. There are many ways to pray. I have introduced Centering Prayer before with some of you and also Christian Mindfulness as well as walking a labyrinth or other prayer practices. This summer, we will be trying a new way of prayer called "Wild Church", which occurs outdoors. We also practice traditional prayers that can be read or simply to sit in reflection with God and see where that prayer leads. Prayer is the best wireless connection out there. In the clamoring of voices to vie for our attention, some time with God really does give us strength.
4. Worship. Worship is the place and time that God does something for us and to us, so that we may be sent out into the world. Being absorbed in the means of grace, God's word and the sacraments, a person is sustained in faith. Worship is a centering force for our soul restoration and being attached to a community of believers, as imperfect as we are, we have a support for each other as hear a word of Good News each week.

Slide: My Sheep

I wish I could tell you it was easy to have a spiritual life, but the truth is, if you eat a horrible diet and never exercise, you will notice your physical health wane, too. Without practices in our spiritual activity, all of us will find that same problem happen for our souls. And, no doubt we all want to have restoration, rest for our souls, and an ever present sense of God in our lives. God knows we need it. And, the psalmist also knew he needed it.

The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. The Lord makes me lie down in green meadows. The Lord restores my soul...

May the Lord restore your soul today and may we all be open to our need of soul restoration. I pray this for you. Amen.